

# THE LIVING HEDGE



Leslie Paul

by  
LESLIE PAUL

author of *The Annihilation of Man*

Mr. Paul's recent book, *The Annihilation of Man*—that 'great and terrifying book', as the *Observer* called it—did much to mark the beginning of a vital change in the tide of contemporary thought. The change can be described in general terms as a change from a materialistic to a religious direction, and more particularly as a reaction against the so-called ideologies, which have been usurping the functions of religion in men's minds.

*The Annihilation of Man* is the more significant, because its author had been known, before the war, as an able writer who approached the tasks and problems of the age from the familiar 'left' ideological angle. If such a writer could, truthfully and vividly, retrace his own history, the value of his contribution to contemporary thinking would be very greatly increased.

In *The Living Hedge* Mr. Paul tells the first part of that history. It relates the adolescent loss of the faith, which the author was later to recapture. It is the autobiography of the child and the raw, idealistic youth—acutely aware of surroundings and people, impressed but not so easily convinced. The beginning of a story, which Mr. Paul will continue and complete.

Yet the picture is complete in itself. Most autobiographies fail because they fail to strike the balance between childhood and youth, maturity and age. This is a picture of childhood and youth, in a limited environment which was perpetually seeking to burst its limitations. What might come out of that is not the writer's concern. We do not know another English book which has done quite this—unless Mr. Wells did it, in fiction, with *Love and Mr. Lewisham*. *The Living Hedge* is not fiction.

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THE LIVING HEDGE

*by the same author*



THE ANNIHILATION OF MAN  
(a study of the crisis in the West)



# THE LIVING HEDGE

by  
LESLIE PAUL

‘ And the *Tenant* shall keep quick the living hedge ’  
Old Farm Lease

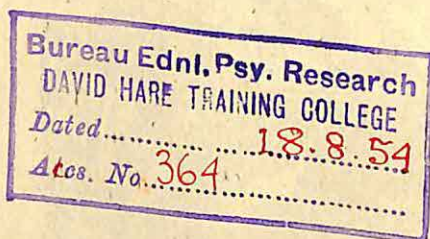


*with wood-engravings by Reynolds Stone*

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TO THE MEMORY OF  
MY MOTHER

*No attempt has been made to tell this story chronologically. Incidents, backgrounds, names, have here and there been disguised. Two childhood contemporaries have, somewhat unaccountably, become one. These small deceptions aside the rest is the spirit, the excitement, and the atmosphere of childhood as I remember them.*

L. P.



## Chapter One

### THE CORN WAS ORIENT

The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which should never be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting.—TRAHERNE

I walked angrily out of the Salvador Dali landscape of the bombed land and almost at once it seemed, was back in the unattainable world of childhood. Untouched, unspoilt, the autumn sun on its weathered elm boards, 'The Pomegranates' stood in the stillness of the afternoon.

In the dusty square before its porch the flashy brakes driven by sneering men with canary yellow waistcoats and yellow-beriboned whips once drew up. On Sunday evenings in that other war we walked here, before my father was called up, taking turns to push the pram. The baby was thrust into the arbour smelling of honeysuckle and placidly sucked a sugared teat while we were set free in the garden which housed the body of an old horse omnibus.

We made a mad rush for it, for whoever scrambled on the top-deck first could climb into the driver's seat, halloo and swear and lash an imaginary four-in-hand. The second was conductor and had the compensation of bossing the third, demanding fares and turning her off 'because we don't go any farther, we're turning round and if you want to get on again you'll have to pay another penny'. Kenneth and I, with a few years of male superiority in hand, easily won the race for power, which made Marjorie the passenger. She resented a passive role.

'I wanter be driver,' she would stand and holler. 'It isn't fair. You never let *me* be anything.' 'Being a passenger *is* being something,' I explained. '*Girls* can't be drivers,' my always logical brother would point out, with polite finality. If Marjorie accepted her inferior role it was with a view to behaving in a most unpassengerlike manner—refusing her fare, saucing the conductor, or running down our bus. All other active parts being denied her

she might decide to be the horse and cavorted, strained, galloped between imaginary shafts, and bit customers. My brother and I viewed this with disapproval because it was hardly proper for one's sister to be a horse in public.

One could easily tire of coaches and horses if there were real ones travelling at a spanking pace down the road in full view of the top-deck. Then the shabby vehicle became a pirate galleon and we stalked about the top-deck shouting 'Cast her off!' and 'Hard a-port!' and 'Let go the tops'!!' and such other exciting nautical shouts as we could remember from Captain Marryat. When the bus was a galleon, the surrounding green was the Caribbean and one could only venture across this—even then at peril to one's life—if one puffed and blew and made swimming motions with one's arms. It was exciting to pretend to be drowning and to reach the gangway only by a last despairing effort and to be hauled aboard by the waiting crew. Marjorie felt it proper to decide to be the nurse on shipboard, having learnt from Aunt Florrie that there were stewardesses on transatlantic liners, and it was to no purpose that we argued with her that sailors, especially the piratical sort, did not have nurses. Usually Father would bring us out a biscuit each, as large as a tea-plate and much thicker, which crumpled up feathery and sweet in the mouth and for its full enjoyment needed a swig of gassy lemonade to wash it down. On this hard tack we thrived so long as we could persuade Marjorie not to dip her dirty handkerchief into our rum issue to wash our mortal wounds. If it happened to be Fenimore Cooper and not Marryat that my brother and I were reading then we would be very noble Indians and the bus would be a frontier fort waiting to be stormed. We stalked the paleface scouts silently through the shrubbery and burst with murderous whoops upon startled suburban beer-drinkers; we died of thirst on the waterless rockery and perished horribly in forest fires in the middle of the lawn until Mother deeply, almost superstitiously, affected by too much realism, stopped us.

A lymphatic child, rather younger than the youngest of us, tacked himself on to us with that exasperating tenacity which only a stupid child can show. Though we discouraged him cruelly, hunting him as bison, harpooning him as whale, scalping him as white papoose, threatening even to run him over with our bus, he



was never alienated. 'I'm nod playing with you. I'm a drain. Waj me. I'm going indo a stajion.' And he would 'shush-shush' mournfully up and down the gravel path, his head hanging down as if it were too heavy for him. That increased our scorn, for train games belonged to infancy.

'The Pomegranates' had even then another, a far greater significance. Here the country began. A narrow unmetalled lane opposite the inn passed a few villas, turned to the right and became all at once the country. A high hawthorn hedge bounded it on either side. On the left we could peer through the hedge gaps into an orchard whose limits we could not see for the ground dipped, then rose again and the trees obscured the farther edge. Sheep had cropped the daisy-pied grass until it was as fine as a lawn, and in the spring there were lambs under the blossoms. It seemed the heart of the country; yet it was only the beginning.

On the bend of the lane stood a limestone building with its name, 'The Orchard Bakery', painted on the slates of its steeply pitched roof. As far as the bend in the road the smells were all of the country—goats, cow, and horse dung in the road, young hawthorn shoots in the sun, ploughed earth, sharp fresh scents, but the moment you turned the corner, the hot heavy smell of newly baked bread was about you like a benediction. To my romantic proposition that I was sure the bread made here ought to be nicer than ours, which was bought from a town baker—'So why didn't we buy it?'—my father snorted 'Talk sense!'

They have been building houses along the lane. The meadows to the right are ploughed into trenches overgrown with nettles, and the gaunt frames of houses which cannot be finished until the war is over stand up where once were trees. The living hedge has been uprooted and the turf torn off the fields, and the lane is curiously exposed and desolate now, and walking down it is like living in a house from which one wall has been blown away. There is a new view of the gasworks, gaunt and impressively horrific, enveloped in a smoke of their own making with a sun dropping behind them through a flotilla of barrage-balloons, like a swollen blood orange. Yet still the orchard with its guardian hedge stands unchanged, though the bakery is derelict and has lost its roof.

This once magic lane ran between its hawthorn cliffs down to a

stream crossed by a bridge with a single handrail. I found the stream, a tributary of the Ravensbourne, a little thinner, and dirtier, I thought, but then that might have been imagination, and crossed by the bridge (which now boasted two handrails). The cottages which faced the river were unchanged and the end one where as a boy I bought windfalls from the orchard and coloured fizzy drinks still had its wasp-haunted front parlour window stuffed, it appeared, with the identical bruised apples, sticky flyblown sweets and kali suckers which had made my mouth water those years ago.

The cottages were the last outposts of our suburb. From the plank bridge a path led to a footbridge over the railway and then by footpaths across fields until the villages that were really part of the country were reached. The country? There was no trace of it. It might never have existed; for all was one vast housing estate. Yet the fields and footpaths were clearer in my mind's eye than the actuality about me, as I walked the paved streets trying to follow the exact course of the old path and wondering whether the hawthorns which grew here and there, a crippled ash at a street corner and a gnarled and shorn oak in a front garden were once part of the tree-lined way through fields.

Tree-lined, hedged, on one side only: on the other an open tarred wooden fence was all that separated one from the furrowed earth, so that naturally one turned one's head to look over the fence, and now I cannot remember what the meadows to the right looked like, but the vast field to the left is still vivid in the memory. Even allowing for boyish exaggeration it must have been a huge field, for the footpath ran alongside it for half a mile and it curved back, hugging the railway to the fringe of the town itself where the church towers, the town hall, and the chimneys shimmered in the blue distance of another shore. The parallel furrows riding to that infinity in which they must meet, and the great unbroken arc of heaven gave one a sense of space in which after the suburban streets and the green gulf of the lane the eye was compelled to rove. Something lifted in me with a great sense of release just to behold. In the centre of this field stood a single lopsided tarred hut, looking as forlorn as the ark must have done coming to rest on Ararat, or like the basket of a balloon dropped there by accident by one of the intrepid aviators we were just beginning to hear so



much about. I thought that hut the loneliest place I knew. Once, in the war, the field flowed like golden water with wheat. Mostly it grew prosaic roots and was neatly divided into squares for the purpose. The roots, Kenneth informed me knowledgeably, were used to make jam in the factory which steamed like a liner across the eastern horizon. The labourers advancing in unison as they hoed the weeds resembled the tiny golliwogs jerked by threads the girls made in school.

Here I first heard the lark. Leaning alone on the dew-wet fence one spring morning and dreaming into the golden haze I became conscious of a persistent jubilation all round me in the air, not to be ascribed to anything so humble as a bird, but as though the morning itself were singing. Then my eyes focused on a small creature climbing and fluttering in the air as though it were caught by a string. It was this that was singing, *this!* Of course, a lark! All my haphazard reading about birds acquired meaning. The insignificant morsel bursting with song was what the poets wrote about. It was real and actual too, unlike the many things one read of and never encountered in the suburban streets and which became as legendary as the phoenix and the unicorn. I forgot my Sunday suit and crawled under the fence and sat on the wet verge of the ploughland, watching one lark, two—three—and soon I was tired of counting, for a whole choir was rising and falling across the field just as if the sun were pulling up this paean by its own strength from the brown clods the larks resembled when they ran along furrows.

A similar lyric astonishment broke over me when I met, not much later, a swallow. A swallow was, like the pelican whose beak holds more than his belly can, a word which was a joke. There were many such jokes one enjoyed as one grew up, 'a-bomb-in--a bull,' 'shrike', 'hippopotamus', 'sally silly kassid', which made one laugh deliriously inside merely to think of them. My scout patrol was sensibly called the Eagles, but the Swallows were never allowed to forget the humiliation of their title. It never occurred to me that the bird existed.

'Look, the first swallow,' my Scoutmaster cried, as we walked across the Seven Fields to find the source of the Ravensbourne. I laughed at his joke, hardly hearing him, for I was not interested

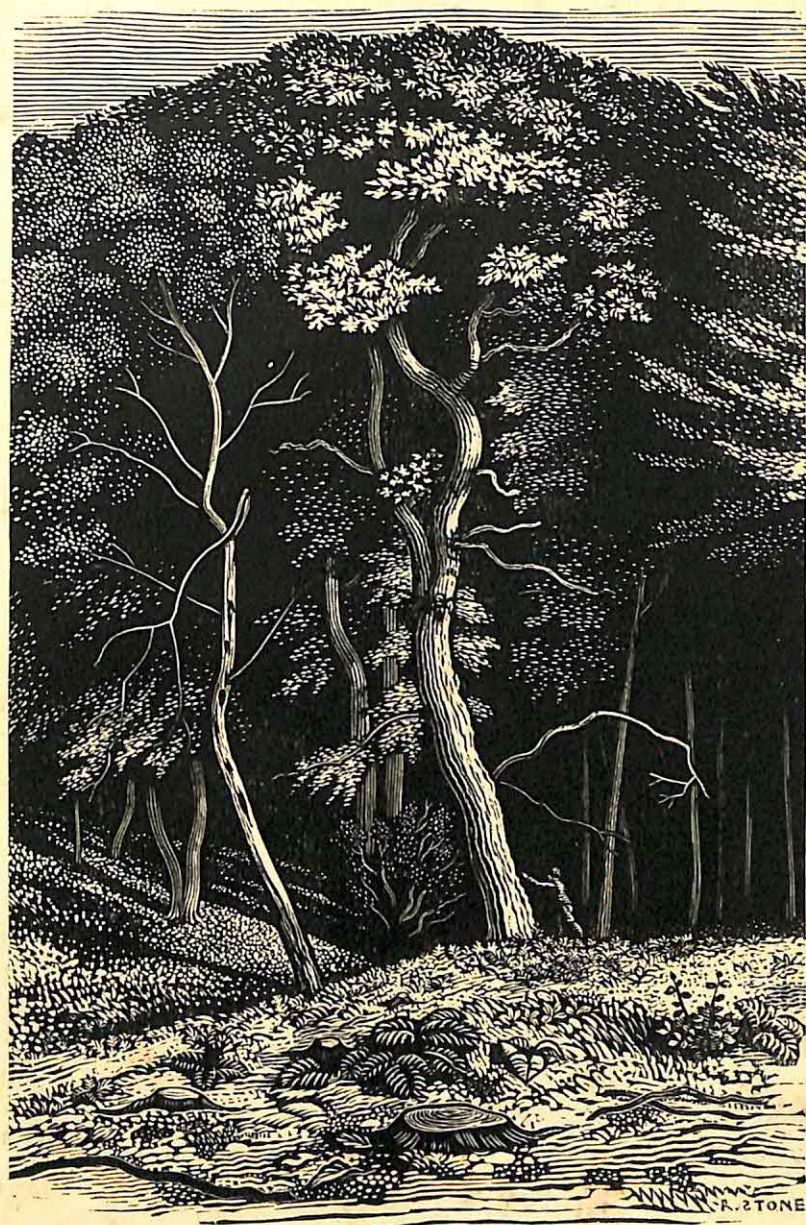
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in swallows. A regal bird with scything wings and forked tail, rufous breast and purple back was sweeping the downs almost about my feet. The April sun glittered on it as on a swimmer turning in water. It was proud and swift and terrible in its beauty as the Holy Ghost descending like a dove at the Jordan. I was too spellbound by this spirit weaving about me unafraid to listen to my Scoutmaster pedantically telling us all about a creature as ridiculous as a swallow, and when finally argued into accepting *this* as a swallow was enraged. This makes me think I must have been a precious child. Yet there it was! To see a skylark or a swallow was in its way as surprising as meeting a saint would have been, for I did not believe that saints or skylarks could inhabit a world as lowly as my own.

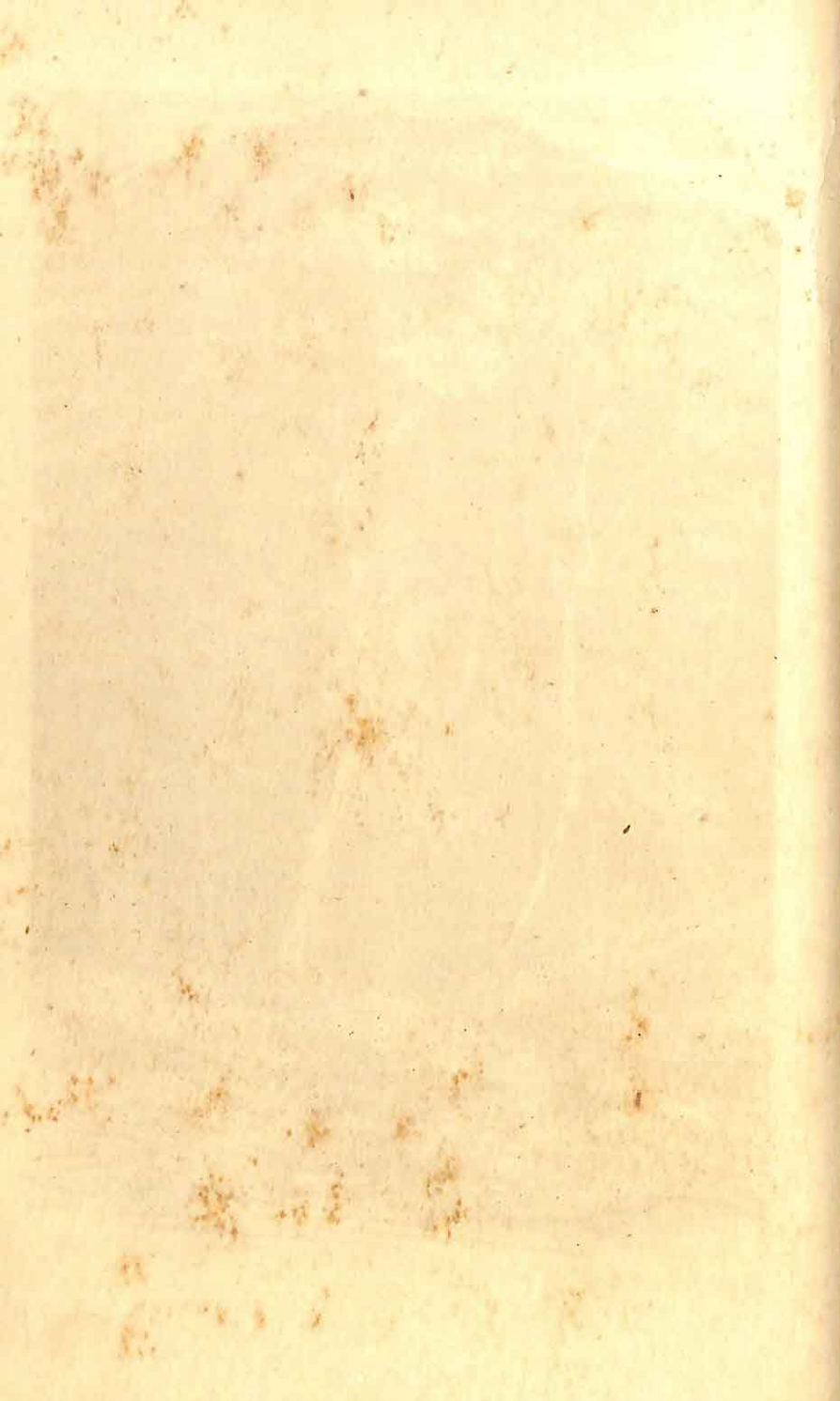
The skyline was unchanged as I walked up Whitefoot Lane. The trees and the hedges were dear and familiar: the road surface was unmetalled still and no-one had filled in the primitive ditch in which we hunted for rats. But there was an air of shabbiness, of neglect in the hedges and fields as though the farmers whose highway this lane had been had already migrated. Now, again, I was in that strange no-man's-land into which the builder would already have launched himself, had not the war halted his activities. A zinc cistern was lying in a field. Whenever land becomes derelict an old cistern appears upon it. The sign is as infallible as any I know. Presently it will be joined by a bottomless bucket or two, odd lengths of planking and pegs and pieces of string. The indifferent building, for which future generations will curse us, begins.

A wood I knew like my own garden, rose on the skyline. We came to it as scouts on hot Saturday afternoons for games and to fry our sausages and potatoes for our cooking tests, and so often that the shape of bushes and trees still looked friendly. I came here alone, too, to wander down its winding paths and among its green chambers. Once, during a religious bout, I brought a Bible to read, but when I had climbed my favourite tree found that its close print could not compete with the trembling summer's day. The long walk had dissipated my unhappiness and my moral state was suddenly more comic than tragic. Better to sit still and by an act of will let the whole world, and my own neurotic self, slide away as if they had never been, and with part of my soul of which I was





R. & TONE





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hardly aware, absorb it all—the dazzling sky, and the trees which strained up to it, inch by inch, month after month, until they died, and to feel with wonder the earth turning in endless space and trailing for ever its dunce's cap of shadow.

The wood sheltered for many years an old woman, Woodbine Winnie, of whom we were very much in awe for she was as much an eccentric as that old gentleman of Purley who clothed himself in newspapers and lived in brown paper bags, assuring reporters anxious to interview him—for they too believed in paper—that plenty of paper was all that was necessary for a man's happiness. Until we located Winnie we might be startled by stumbling scaredly into her as we fled shouting round bushes. Her clothes were shapeless sails, drab and torn, and she shambled around as scrawny and springy as an old hen, with her eyes to the ground. For all that I remember the colour of her eyes, a clear speedwell blue set in a brown face as ferociously wrinkled as crocodile hide. Winter and summer one could see her crouching so close to her handful of sticks that the fire burnt between her thighs. She would squat thus for hours, sometimes cooking a meal in a discarded tin. We said she was a witch, and perhaps believed it. And we hated the way she cursed us when we ran into her and averted her wrath by the gift of Woodbines. Some years ago she broke her leg, it was said, and they took her to hospital where she died on discovering herself within four walls for the first time in her life.

A hundred yards or so beyond the wood the decaying hedges looked as though tanks had crossed them, and on the right a housing estate had halted in a straight soldiers' file at the edge of the lane. But the lane itself was never straight and so portions of its hedges and ditches appeared every now and then before the houses. It was thus easy to re-picture what the lane had once been like. By the roadside was a fallen trunk which our bottoms had worn smooth in its barkless places; now completely stripped of bark it shone like a polished skeleton, for it was at the doorstep of another generation. It had rained the night before and puddles gleamed before houses. In one of these a ragged child was sailing a cigarette packet and bombing it with pebbles. Old newspapers had blown into the hedge on my left. Yet if I averted my head from the line of houses and looked over the hedge on the left, nothing

seemed to have changed. A field almost as big as that in which I first saw larks, stretched there, bordered on one extremity by the woods of the park and on its remotest edges by rows of dolls' houses and a fringe of alders. The field, recently ploughed, smelt wet and strong and rural. And, miracle of miracles, a flight of lapwings wheeled with chequered wings over the ploughed waste, mournfully crying, for all the world as if that field were not imprisoned by one of the largest housing estates near London. I caught my breath and listened and was back in childhood. For a moment it was not the lapwings which were fantastic but the grey line of houses behind me.

Yet I did not think a great deal of that field in childhood. It was always ploughland, and ploughland was not worth the trouble of trespassing upon, for it so quickly fatigued you and at once exposed you and cut off your escape, because you could not run on it. I remember two things very vividly: one, that when you burst through the netting undergrowth of the wood on to the verge of this field you were caught (as in that other field) with an overwhelming sense of vastness. The field stretched before you, world without end. Nothing seemed to confine it. The sky flooded over one like the waves of the sea. Everything was sky—earth but a thin plate under our feet hardly strong enough to bear its bright dome. The other fact I remember was that it was a dull and tedious field to walk past on our way to further adventure. So much so that when we came to a gate half-way along we always looked over, because there we might see interesting things in the farm buildings—chestnut horses, farm carts and machinery, stacks of straw or hay and men at work. The buildings are intact still, though in need of repair and the same blue painted farm wagons and carts are parked under the old galvanized iron shelter. Ploughs and harrows are rusting amongst weeds. Hay and straw stacks tell that farming is not quite dead here; indeed, it seems astonishingly to have resurrected itself.

It was therefore the less endurable to look to the right of the lane where the paved streets advance over the meadows on which we used to trespass and lie and talk in the deep June grass or quietly watch the reapers and wait for the sunset hour when the last squares of corn fell before the scythes and men stood round



the edge of the field with loaded guns waiting for the rabbits to bolt, and we rushed in with sticks. I first saw corncrakes here—four, flitting like shadows across the ground in the twilight and so swiftly that their peculiar cry, like the sharpening of a scythe, broke out first here, then there, then at several points simultaneously and we could have imagined the field inhabited by a host of corncrakes. That day it was dark when we left but the sun had been hot and the heat smote up into our faces as we walked. I never smell parched July earth in the sun but I hear again the corncrakes crying in that cornfield. There will be no corncrakes there now.

I walked on. Then, at the end of the lane I would go no further for the fields in which I first camped had gone. A phalanx of houses stood solid in the twilight. Here had been an oak-tree which I climbed one soft Whitsun morning to watch the sun rise and to pull down dead twigs, burnished in the new sun, for our fire. Here too, we had been wakened early one morning when it was barely light by agonized bellowing to find that a cow was calving. We watched the farmer, in the underwater light of pre-dawn, fumbling at the cow while she struggled from him and the calf, still attached by its navel cord, stumbled weakly after her.

I turned back. By now the light was failing and a cool wind was blowing and clouds were blanketed across the west and the trees stood darkly green. The wet earth of the ploughed field shone and the puddles were steel. A rain light was over everything and I walked briskly. The light faded very rapidly and by the time I was back to the park it was almost dark under the trees. With the fading of the light, the scents seemed to come out of the earth. The cisterns were no longer visible and if there were patches of gleaming white in the hedges I was not to know that they were newspapers. It was possible to forget the changes and to imagine that all was as I had once known it.

As I passed the wood and came upon the bend where the lane drops rather swiftly to the main road I saw a familiar silhouette of a fir against the redly stained clouds in the west and all at once I was back to a winter afternoon when I had walked alone on a frosty road, out of the darkness of my home streets. Here at this rise I climbed above the mist and fog and looked over banks of yellow wool to the setting sun. The sun was a red lacquer disk

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sinking into an orient sea and against it one twisted fir was silhouetted, and I remember staring as though I could not get my fill and saying to myself over and over again, 'A Japanese picture—it's just like a Japanese picture', and wishing suddenly that I could paint and so never lose this vision.

By the side of the park ran a narrow strip of old untouched woodland, its paths much as they have ever been, and I walked among looming bushes where ululating voices warned me of lovers, upon whom I might easily otherwise have stepped, and lit my pipe.

When I came out on to the road again it was quite dark. The trees were spectral and night pawed hugely by the roadside. The crown of the road glimmered faintly under the stars. Some youngsters came swinging along, arm-in-arm, shouting rather than singing a song of the last war:

*There's a long, long trail a-winding  
Unto the land of my dreams,  
Where the nightingales are singing,  
And the white moon beams,*

and I heard it with a sense of shock for I too had tramped down this lane and sung it. We would play, and suddenly dark would be upon us before we were half-way home. It was wartime and the dark so often meant danger. We would shrink into that intimacy that a common fear thrusts upon children. We would pretend otherwise but we were afraid of the dark. Even in the lit streets of our suburb—if they were lit—the dark would crouch between the half-obscured lamps and when I was not consciously afraid of it, it oppressed me, a heavy smothering thing to be walking through. But the dark of the countryside unrelieved by lamps of any sort was different, was in its way alive and terrible. In town one knew confidently that one could walk through it and come across the familiar buildings and pavements and that was reassuring. Here it blocked everything out and however bravely we stepped we had a feeling of groping through a thing that was about our eyes and throats. We would blunder a bit at corners, and the corners never came where we expected them, as though the lane were tricking us. We would wonder whether we were off our road. Arms would be



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stoutly linked, warm arms pressed against warm ribs, and sometimes our fingers were linked though we pretended not to notice the fact and we would stretch, four or five of us in a line across the road, those in the middle glad to be there and sorry for those whose flanks were exposed to the pinch of darkness. Sometimes we would bump into drunks returning from the Green Man and stop with fright and edge to one side to let them pass, watching them loom and fade, like great hulks passing a dinghy at sea, sparks trailing from their pipes. We would sing:

*Show me the way to go home,  
I'm tired and I wanna go to bed,  
I had a little drink about an hour ago,  
And it's gone right to my head. . . .*

sing loudly and threateningly as though our singing might silence whatever waited among the rustling trees, sing to drown the sound of owls or the complaining of the wind in the telegraph wires—not a sound to listen to at night when you are frightened.

Then, with surprise, with relief, with unconcealed joy we would rush back to the lighted main road, warm in our bones with the feeling that explorers must have when they come through incredible difficulties at last to their bourne.

I came back to that main road. Already the country I had left, half magic, half desolation, old woods, new houses, grew unreal. I do not want to go back there ever again, lest the next time nothing that I remember shall be left. Orchards, bare ploughed fields, thick spring hedges in which blackbirds nested, miles of meadowland and hedgerow where I hunted spring anemones and the first primroses, and coppices where violets grew, corncrakes in harvest fields and peewits crying above wastes, cows bringing forth calves and shining tents pitched beneath great oaks . . . what of these was there left now, what therefore of my own boyhood? For all its centuries the old husbandry was as nothing. I wondered why I should mind so much. Cities have to grow, men have to be housed, so why this nostalgia for a vanished land? I hate, as all of us do, this casual untidy bourgeois way of spreading the towns until they are blight, but it was not of this alone I was thinking. It was that I had no roots: the second war, the devastation of



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London, and now this were evidence that I belonged to a generation to which it is not permitted to be attached to a place.

We came out of our suburbs into this country as into another land. No streets ran straightly, dully, here. No rows of windows stared down at us with grandmotherly eyes. Here everything was new. The hedges and trees lived for themselves according to their own laws, which were not our laws. Nature clutched its secrets to itself and we had to prise out our discoveries, rats and voles in the ditches, birds nesting in thickets, insects crepitating in the grass. The meadows and woods and lanes led, not to dull safe places, but to undiscovered lands. It was all so uncharted and so endless in its variety. We had to make maps in our heads. We never knew what we might find. And we ourselves, we were free in it.

I could not have believed, as a child, that it would change much, still less that it might vanish so completely that I might doubt whether it had ever been. But it had gone. The living hedge had been hewn down and the heart was out of the ground.

## Chapter Two

### LOW BREATHINGS COMING AFTER ME

I heard among the solitary hills  
Low breathings coming after me, and sounds  
Of indistinguishable motion, steps  
Almost as silent as the turf they trod—

WORDSWORTH

**B**illy Prince, whose father and mother were dead, and who lived with his married sister, was bathing with me in the Ravensbourne where it ran through Bromley Woods. Billy was little and nine, and I was ten. He was not my proper friend because he had to help in his brother's shop and go out delivering pastries, or help with the van, and had no time to come out to play. Besides he was not strong which Mother said was because he ate too much new bread which makes you pale-faced and weak from indigestion. But I liked white bread. I used to buy a hot penny loaf every Saturday morning after swimming at the baths and it never gave me indigestion.

I had always liked Billy ever since we acted Hubert and Arthur together (I was Hubert) at the Christmas Concert at school. Although his clothes smelt of flour or dough, he looked so appealing, his pale frightened face, with its sharp blue eyes and tumbling golden hair, pleading mercy, that I was glad I had not even in play to put out his eyes.

**BILLY:** 'O save me, Hubert, save me! My eyes are out  
Even with the fierce looks of these bloody men.'

**ME:** 'Give me the iron, I say, and bind him here.'

**BILLY:** 'Alas, what need you be so boisterous-rough?  
I will not struggle, I will stand stone still.  
For heaven's sake Hubert, drive these men away  
And I will sit as quiet as a lamb;



LOW BREATHINGS COMING AFTER ME

I will not stir, nor wince, nor speak a word  
Nor look upon the iron angrily:  
Thrust but these men away, and I'll forgive  
Whatever torment you do put me to.'

'Just look at the lambs,' my mother said audibly through the school hall.

BILLY: 'O, now you look like Hubert! All the while  
You were disguised.'

As my mother said afterwards—he made your heart bleed.

When Billy was in the catholic choir and had a clean white ruff on and a white surplice over a scarlet cassock he looked as though he had just come down from heaven. I sometimes felt that a boy ought not to look so much like an angel, but that was envy mostly, for I had glasses which cut my nose and ears, and a squint about which I was always being tormented.

I suddenly thought, as I stood up to my ankles in the water and watched Billy climbing gingerly up the bank to dry himself, his wet bottom sticking up pink and shining and his hair falling like Mowgli's in a silk wet tangle over his ears, that he was beautiful. I had never thought about anybody—outside books—as being beautiful before. There were just Mum and Ken and Wally, and Marjorie. They were just themselves, without labels, explanations or excuses, and could not help what they looked like.

Billy was on his knees in the sweet-smelling grass in which the grasshoppers sizzled. Beyond him rose the hazel brakes in which we would gather nuts in the autumn; farther still the water meadows in which the cows grazed in grass so rich that it was almost blue. Ringing the meadow again the rounded English woods, hazed and mysterious, with wine-dark depths. It was like this in the Garden of Eden, I thought, even to having no clothes.

The more I stared at Billy the less I wanted him to leave me and get dried and dressed in his dough-smelling clothes, so I shouted: 'There's lots of time. I'm coming out too.'

When I got up on the bank beside him he was already drying himself and sunning, and he had rubbed his hair and made it shine as though it were polished. I said: 'Don't let's get dressed.'



## LOW BREATHINGS COMING AFTER ME

'It's rude,' he said, looking frightened and he arranged the towel carefully round his middle.

He didn't hurry and I was glad because I could watch him, and I wanted so much to watch him that I did not bother about drying but let the sun do it. He was pink all over like May blossom from rubbing himself and when he turned over, his bottom swelled up in two beautiful pink cheeks.

I caught a grasshopper and made him look at it in my palm.

'I'd like to have one,' he said excitedly, so I let it go and it jumped right on his chest and he screamed and scrambled away, then he was ashamed and laughed and we crawled through the long grass catching them. We put them in a match-box which I had in my trouser pocket.

He started to get dressed after that so I said 'I shan't give you them unless you stop undressed with me. I want to get brown.'

'You promised,' he said hotly.

'You're afraid.'

'I'm not,' he said sulkily and turned away. I couldn't bear him turning away like that so I chucked the matchbox over to him and turned away without a word, as though I would have nothing to do with him.

He took it and said nothing, but he did not like me turning away and not speaking to him so he said:

'I mustn't be late for the shop or my brother will whip me.'

'I'd kill anybody who whipped me,' I said fiercely. No-one ever whipped me really hard. But what I really meant was that I'd like to kill anyone who whipped him. 'Does it hurt? Do you bleed?'

'Mind your own business,' he said miserably.

'He's not even your brother, let alone your dad. He hasn't the right to whip you.'

'Oh, shut up,' he shouted fiercely. He was almost crying.

I could not think of any way to make him happy again.

'We're Indians,' I said, 'Crowfoot Indians don't wear clothes.'

If we're Indians we'll have to be blood brothers.'

He did not know anything about blood brothers, he was such a baby, and I had to explain.

'Coo, that'd hurt.'

'Not much, silly. I've got a pin. A pin's nothing.'

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He hung back a lot but I persuaded him after I'd pricked my own finger. He squeaked when the pin went in but it didn't hurt much and then we lay together and pressed the blood out and made it mix.

'Now we don't have to have any secrets from each other.'

He looked frightened, as though he were worried as to what he might have to tell. I pressed closer. He pushed me off quickly and jumped up.

'Don't,' he shouted. 'You'll go to hell for doing that.'

'Baby,' I said.

'You'll go to hell.'

'You'll go to hell, you mean. All Catholics go to hell.'

He started to cry and took his clothes up and went away and got dressed. Feeling very miserable and mean I got dressed too.

'Catholics are the same as other people. I didn't mean what I said about Catholics,' I said, trying to make up, but he would not answer me.

It was almost dark when we came to Billy's shop and he said fearfully, 'Come in with me and say we're late because you lost something and I helped to find it.'

I went into his shop and smiled at his brother-in-law and told the lie we had made up. Mr. Simister had sharp eyes in his doughy face. They were like darting mice under the hedge of his eyebrows, and he looked hard at me and did not say anything, and I doubted if my lie sounded very convincing.

'Good night, Billy,' I said as Billy shrank round the counter with a shamefaced backward glance at me.

'Say good night to your friend,' said Mr. Simister severely.

'Good night, Les,' said Billy, almost inaudibly.

'Good night, Mr. Simister,' I said raising my cap with hypocritical politeness and looking hungrily at the rich cream horns. There were consolations in living at a baker's.

'Good night, boy,' he said. 'Here, here's something for you.' He plunged his hand in the bin he kept the stale cakes in and picked me out a currant bun. 'I think you're a good friend for Billy to have. A good influence. The way you told me straight just then, I mean. Billy needs a good influence.'

I walked backwards blushing into the night. He stood there in



his low window, his face in shadow, dusting the flour off his coat sleeves, watching me go down the street. I looked back and he was still there; his eyes bored into my shoulder blades as I walked, two red-hot needles, and I was frightened. God could look down on you like that, seeing through you from the low window of the sky, and God knew how wicked you were. The bun was old and hard, and when he was out of sight I threw it over a fence.

Walking home with Billy had taken me out of my way but the moon had risen and my spirits rose too, and I began to forget Mr. Simister. I took the short cut home across the railway fields, though had it been a sombre night, nothing would have drawn me into that houseless waste. When I came upon that moonlit turf, pocked with deep holes, and saw behind me the last street lamp dwindle until it was a paling yellow star insecurely tethered to the dark bulk of the retreating streets and saw, oh, so far across the radiant plain, the shrunken row of houses, raked and sinister with their new silver caps, my courage began to desert me. As I walked, something appeared to walk with me, to breathe loudly upon me. I stopped, as cold as stone with terror, to make sure that I was alone. Nothing moved, and then I began to wish something would move, for the stillness was unnerving. The moonlight poured down without sound from the flinty sky, silencing even the familiar noise of distant trams or trains: the world was frozen by it. I could feel the immense height of endless night sky above me crushing me flat to the earth, as I might crush a fly against a window pane with my palm. I suddenly remembered Mr. Simister in his shop window and looked about me fearful lest God should choose this moment to appear in the sky and look upon me, and knew that if He did I should die. Fear made this disaster seem imminent and I took to my heels; but now as I ran that other ran beside me and I raced home and banged with terror on the door shouting 'The devil's after me.' My mother, easily infected with fright, opened the door in consternation. Inside the lighted house my terror instantly evaporated and became a joke.

Kenneth was practising the violin. Marjorie was bent like a bow over her much-thumbed copy of *Little Women*, her long raven-dark hair shrouding her face. Paddy was sleeping with his nose on his paws in the hearth. Oh, bright familiar world! I ran round the

kitchen table making Paddy wake and bark, shouting, 'The devil's after me,' and pulled my sister's hair and pinched my brother's behind. For a minute there was pandemonium.

'Now you stop this instant, or I'll box your ears,' my mother threatened. 'You ought to know better than to joke about such things; making such a row, too—and home so late, I ought to tell your father.'

'Daddy ought to whip him,' said Marjorie.

'The fool nearly broke my violin,' said Kenneth.

'That'll do, all of you,' said Mother. 'You can all go to bed, and good riddance.'

'See what you've done, you fool?' hissed my brother.

A week or two after that I shinned up a telegraph pole as far as the cross-trees, and was going to hang on to them when a boy shouted that I would be electrocuted if I did. In my fright I let go altogether and landed with such force that I bit my knee when I doubled up. As only nature bothered to clean my teeth then, I must have got some infection in the wound—though perhaps not from my teeth—and some days later my knee began to swell and lock and I could not walk. My Uncle Arthur happened to be visiting us and there was no subject on earth on which he did not consider himself informed. He prodded my puffed, inflamed, and painful knee and decided that I had dislocated it.

'Just let me pull your leg forward and let it go and it will jerk back and set itself. You'll be as right as rain in a couple of minutes.'

All the family seemed to think that this was a very reasonable proposition and regarded my opposition to it as crass foolishness. However, I was determined that no-one should maul my knee and caught hold of the poker and screamed, saying that I would bash anybody who tried to touch me. Uncle, an old soldier, was prepared to use disciplinary measures, having no experience of my uncontrollable temper, but my mother, looking uncertain, gave way before this display of violence.

'Leave the boy alone,' she said reasonably, 'I expect it hurts too much. We'll see how it is in the morning.' 'Seeing how it is in the morning' was a favourite family nostrum; it quite often worked too.



I still think it extremely fortunate that Uncle Arthur did not try his primitive witch doctoring on me. The dislocated knee turned out to be a bad abscess which had to be constantly poulticed: for weeks I was helpless, carried up to bed at night and down to the couch in the morning, where I would sit and read or play with my lead soldiers all day, or with my music propped up in front of me, play 'The March of the Men of Harlech' on my fife. At the end of this ordeal, pale and weakened, I was unable to walk, for my legs had forgotten how to do it, and I had to practise in the back yard like a baby, feeling my way round the walls and taking my first tottering steps without aid into the blue, dragging my injured and helpless leg with me. Billy Prince used to visit me every day, bringing me toys, and comics to read. He would sit by my couch and, with *Comic Cuts*, wave away the flies which were attracted by the smell of my bad knee. It was a job which exhausted me. When I started to walk he tried to help me by holding me up and encouraging me fondly.

My mother said to me when I was getting better, 'What a faithful friend Billy is to you. He never misses coming to see you.' Then to Uncle Arthur, 'Billy worships our Leslie. Fancy, he comes to see him every day.' Then to me, 'You must ask him to tea now you're well and can stay up. It's nice to have a friend like that.'

My heart gave a leap of excitement. Yes, of course, Billy loves me, I thought; and I felt mean and hypocritical for never thinking how kind it was of him to come and see me every day. I just had not thought of it at all. The shameful reason why I had given it no thought was because I did not like Billy any more, not as I had done that day in the river. He was beautiful, of course, but he was also a cry-baby; and I now loved a boy who was neither. The boy was Jack—he had never come to see me once, but I still loved him; with a far stronger feeling than anything I had felt for Billy.

Jackie Drew was in my class at the elementary school. His parents were in India and he lived with his grandmother, which cast an air of mystery around him. We shared top place at the term examination and so came to share the same desk too. In that examination I had written a patriotic essay, 'Your King and Country need you,' in which, with sentiments borrowed from the morning paper, I trounced the slackers who lounged at street



corners. The Head read it out (with some grammatical corrections) to the whole school. Jack had been standing by me when this act took place, an act which produced a sensation in the school of the kind normally aroused only by death, expulsion, or the singing of 'Land of Hope and Glory' on Empire Day. I was physically dizzy with sudden fame, and Jack whispered 'Jolly good, Les, oh, jolly fine, congrats!' and that so self-sufficient and handsome a person as Jack should use my Christian name was the final triumph. What is more, he seemed not to be soft-soaping me. I decided then that I liked Jack very much. 'Can I call you Jack?' I asked after hall. He said I could.

Now that I was cut off from school by sickness I missed Jack very much and was hotly jealous of whoever might be sitting in my place next to him. And waving flies off my knee with *Comic Cuts*, I used to think of the things I would say to him or do for him—like sharpening his pencils or helping him home if he broke his leg—if only I were still sitting next to him.

I hoped that he would visit me until I was sick of hoping and one reason why I was not grateful to Billy was that every time I heard my mother talking in her bright put-on-for-visitors voice at the front door it was always Bill. It hardly seemed possible that one could wish and pray for something so terribly hard and it always turned out to be Bill. God ought at least to listen to me once. Not, of course, that there was any reason why Jack should visit me for we had never made the childish compact of friendship. Too nervous to risk any kind of estrangement, I was stricken shy at the thought of doing so. Supposing he had said, 'But I've already got a friend?' That would have been a terrible snub.

I looked up an old school photograph the other day and found Jack in it just as I remembered him, small-featured, neat, and graceful. He had even teeth which he showed merrily when he laughed, and long legs with which he picked his way over the playground as delicately as a young deer stepping through bracken, and a frowning air of being rapturously absorbed in something going on inside himself.

When I returned to school I was too overwhelmed with happiness at seeing Jack again to be able to speak to him and could only smile and follow him around. We struck up a shy kind of friend-



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ship, playing football after school and walking home together to the corner where we had to part. I knew quite well that I was in love (though I was not at all certain about Jack) because my Aunt Florrie had left around an illustrated volume of love lyrics and reading these (as I read everything) I saw only too clearly that my sentiments were just like those of the poets.

Until then poetry had no meaning unless it was heroic like 'Admirals All', or tragic like King John. The most astonishing discovery of my young life was to find that the wordless emotion I felt for Jack, which made me tremble just to gaze into his grey and quite untroubled eyes, was here docketed and set down, and was poetry—and was called 'love', which before was associated only with duties often difficult and sometimes unpleasant—'Love the Lord thy God', 'Love thine enemy'.

*Bid me to live, and I will live  
Thy protestant to be:  
Or bid me love, and I will give  
A loving heart to thee.*

*A heart as soft, a heart as kind  
A heart as sound and free  
As in the whole world thou can'st find,  
That heart I'll give to thee.*

*Bid this heart stay, and it will stay  
To honour thy decree:  
Or bid it languish quite away,  
An't shall do so for thee.*

*Bid me to weep, and I will weep,  
While I have eyes to see:  
And having none, yet will I keep:  
A heart to weep for thee.*

*Bid me despair, and I'll despair,  
Under that cypress-tree:  
Or bid me die, and I will dare  
E'en death, to die for thee.*

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*Thou art my life, my love, my heart,  
The very eyes of me:  
And hast command of every part,  
To live and die for thee.*

I wrote this out to give to Jack.

I kept the poem screwed up in my pocket all day trying to summon up courage to give it to him, and quite failed until we stood at the corner of Gladiator Street, where we parted.

'I've got something to give you, Jack,' I burst out. 'Hope you don't mind.'

His eyes lit with interest.

'What is it? Let's see. Is it a badge?'

'Well,' I said, faltering because I saw that I had raised false hopes. 'Well—it's a poem.'

He looked gravely at me, did not know what to say.

'A pome? Did you say a pome?'

'Look, take it.' I thrust the grubby paper into his hands. 'It's good. It's just what I think. It's good. Take it. I don't want it. I wrote it out for you.'

He looked even more puzzled, holding it uncertainly. My writing must have presented difficulties. 'To Auntie,' he said. 'Is it a funny one?'

'Anthea,' I said impatiently. 'Oh, that doesn't matter. It's only a title.'

'See you at school, Les,' he said, walking away holding the poem as though it might bite him.

'So long, Jack,' I said. 'Read it. I wrote it out for you. My aunt's got a book.'

He walked slowly away, the little frown of thoughtfulness on his forehead, reading my painstaking copy. Anxiously I watched him go, ever so slowly, reading. And as the light broke upon him, surely he would smile round, or turn and wave, or run back. Surely? But nothing happened. He went slowly on, studying the paper and turned the corner out of sight. I never knew what he made of it. He never mentioned it. I dared not.

Just before the Christmas breaking-up, Jack walking silently beside me on the way home suddenly said, 'I'm not coming back after Christmas.'



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'Not coming back? Where are you going?'

I was stupefied. My world came to an end.

'I'm going to a prep school.'

'What's a prep school?'

'A boarding school. Like the *Gem* and *Magnet*. Then you go to a public school.'

'I'm sorry,' I said after a while, looking at him with dead eyes.

'I'm sorry too, I've gotter go. I expect I'll like it though, an awful lot.'

'Will you have dormitories?'

'Speck so.'

What luck to be next to him. I was already envious of those fortunate boys.

When I got home I gave one look at my dinner and refused it. I could not eat. Mother decided I was sick and questioned me, which made me lose my temper. But I could not even lose my temper well. Jack was going away and I could not eat; it was hard even to sleep with thinking, and when I woke next morning I felt a terrible sorrow sitting on my chest, and could not for a moment or two remember what had happened the day before to give it to me. I got back my appetite after two days but I did not lose my unhappiness. Indeed I had a curious dream about it. I dreamt that Jack came up to me in the street by The Chandos and said to me, 'I'm not going the day I said I was, January the 8th after all. I'm going on the 21st so we'll be able to have some more football. They haven't been able to get all the clothes yet.' 'I'm awfully glad,' I said. 'Gee, I'm awfully glad!'

The next day I did meet Jack by The Chandos and he came up to me and said, 'Les, I'm not going the day I said I was, I'm going on the 21st, so we'll be able to have some more football. They haven't got all my clothes yet.' And I found myself smiling just as in the dream and saying, 'I'm awfully glad.'

I was so frightened by my prophetic dream that I could not say anything more just then and in the days which followed, began to wonder whether I had dreamt both meetings—many dreams were so vivid that I could never be sure they had not actually happened. The boundary between dream and reality was so weak that the one was always overflowing into the other.

The only proof that they could not both be dreams was that Jack stayed until the 21st. Two days before he was due to go I bought him a present of a pocket knife. It cost me sixpence, which was two weeks' pocket money, a huge sacrifice. Just before I was going to take it to him Aunt Florrie said to me, 'Never give knives as presents, they cut friendship, unless you get something blunt in exchange, like a penny.'

All the way up to Jack's house I worried about this. Would a present of a knife spoil our friendship? How terrible that would be. However, as I had bought it now, I would have to give it to him. He was not in, alas, he had gone to football. I did not like to give the knife to anyone but him and so I waited in the street for him to return. But the hours went by and he did not come, and I grew physically sick with the tension of waiting and thought how awful it would be if the knife did cut our friendship and how I'd only have myself to blame, and how it would be a nerve to ask him for a penny in return. So I put the knife in my pocket and went home, and was never able to say good-bye.

Of course I wrote to him. I got one letter back saying that he was sorry he could not keep on writing as he would not have the stamps. One Saturday morning, the following summer, walking alone to Catford to buy margarine at the Maypole for Mother, I bumped into a crowd of boys in a field near Jack's home. They were what my mother would have called 'common boys', and were rolling about in a pie on the ground and Jack was in the middle of them receiving indignities. They stopped and looked at me. Meeting Jack so unexpectedly affected me so curiously that for a moment I could neither see nor hear nor speak. When I found my tongue I said:

"Lo, Jack, didden know you were home."

"Lo, Les," Jack said coolly. He was far off and did not know what to say. He was waiting for me to go.

"I'm going shopping. Got to get on," I said miserably.

Jack and his friends just waited for me to go. I turned away sorrowfully and as I walked up the hill I heard them laugh. At me? At my foolish look just then? At my squint? Had Jack told them of the poem—ah, unbelievable betrayal! All these humiliating



thoughts passed through me. Most final, Jack had come home for holidays and neither written nor called, but had gone out playing with boys I disliked. I could not get over that.

Billy and I had both won a scholarship to the Central School. My brother Kenneth, a studious and brilliant boy with a gift for languages, who deserved the best education that the state could provide, had preceded me there the year before. Looking back I can see no earthly reason now why in equity that scholarship should not have taken us to a secondary school. Mother and Father were too poor to afford fees. The truth was that there were not enough free places in the secondary schools and those of us not (at ten plus) strictly in the top flight were fobbed off with a parsimonious substitute, the Central School, which, labouring under all the staffing, grant and equipment disadvantages of an elementary school did its tremendous best—and it was a remarkable best, too—to give us the nearest thing to a secondary school education. In this it was still further hampered by the necessity, imposed from above, to give us vocational training either of an industrial or a commercial character. We were natural fodder for the labyrinthine London offices, only we did not yet know it. It was more important that that we should write a good hand, achieve a fair speed and accuracy at shorthand and typing and understand the principles of double entry book-keeping than that we should learn anything of men or God or mind. Having a thorough distaste for all utilitarian pursuits, and spending five years in a determination not to learn them, I discovered after I had left school that I had completely escaped education at all and had to begin all over again in my own way and did so, with an obstinate disregard of evening schools and a complete lack of orthodoxy simply because all schools of any kind were damned by my experience of one or two. Jobs, certificates, rewards might come of laborious hours spent in them. But when I went to work I saw that you could spend years in offices and evening schools struggling to get on, but when you had got on, where had you got? Nowhere any right-minded person could conceivably want to be.

Speculations of this kind were remote in the days when I called for Billy at eight o'clock and we walked to school, saving our

tram fares so that we might buy cakes at break, or because of an obscure urge to be tough.

Our bright green school caps with yellow piping pleased us enormously. We enjoyed the prestige of learning French—

*Avez-vous vu le parc de Greenwich?*

*Oui, madame, je l'ai vu!*

and of being classed in 'years' and possessing our own lockers. We were dubiously excited at the thought of learning side by side with girls. We knew nothing of girls in the mass. Would they be caned, too? Should we be caned in front of them, even on our bottoms? We were most anxious to know. When the first thrill had worn off even I, not given to bothering about the states of mind of other boys, knew that Billy was unhappy. He was constantly in trouble at school for doing slipshod work, or for failing to do his homework or for inattention, his eyes began to take on a piteous look and he cringed even in his path as though he expected the heavens to fall upon him unless continuously propitiated. It concerned me very much because Billy was officially my friend and I was priggishly worried by the fear that I might suffer socially at school—and with the teachers too—by association with a boy who was a baby at games, a dullard in class, and was getting a bad name. No boy started a new school more determined to succeed than I.

'My brother-in-law wants to see you,' said Billy one Sunday without enthusiasm. One could tell he had been ordered to give the message.

'Me?' I said in blank astonishment, 'what's he want to see me about?' I could not remember having told a lie for Billy for a long time. 'What have I done?' Billy only shook his head and said he didn't know in the tone that told me that he did. I was the more alarmed because I did not like Mr. Simister and had no relish for an interview with him. It was my experience already that when somebody wanted to see me it meant trouble.

'You needn't be afraid. He daren't hurt *you*,' Billy said sarcastically. I said that I wasn't afraid of anybody.

When I called on Sunday to walk in the fields with Billy after Sunday school, Mr. Simister gave a peculiarly unpleasant smile at the horizon and said, 'Ah, our young friend again.' For the



moment I could not think he meant me and looked round to see whether there was anyone standing behind me. There was not, so I smiled politely, with difficulty, and said good afternoon.

'Come in, Leslie,' he said, making his soft doughy face firm, 'Billy is always talking about you. My wife and I want to ask your advice about Billy.' The slow way he looked me all over made me uncomfortable always, as though I'd got buttons undone.

He smiled the smile which left his eyes out at the wall above Billy who stared stonily out at the sunlit street. Billy was hating me at that moment—he was hating everyone. The street was alive. Cheerful people were walking along it dressed in Sunday best. The trams clanged along as merrily as on a weekday and the fresh wind was waving the pollarded tops of the plane-trees. I gave one anguished look at that bright freedom as the door closed behind me.

Mr. Simister took me into the parlour behind the shop. It had rows of china ornaments on the mantelpiece and dresser, and bronze statues of men holding rearing horses, which would have interested me another time. The tablecloth was bright red with plush bobbles, and the smell of baking bread was stronger here than in the shop. Billy's sister who had the same gold hair, blue eyes and piteous look as Billy, was knitting by the fire. She gave me a startled glance and said, 'Billy's friend! How nice.' Then she looked frightened and stared at Billy who had followed us in as if he knew he did not belong.

'I thought we might talk to Leslie about Billy,' said Mr. Simister, going to the window rubbing his hands on his bottom, and staring out. I stared out around him. If I jumped through the window, as I could have done, into the street, I should be quite free. Mr. Doughy Simister would never catch me. I should run and run. The blue sky looked as lovely as my mother's face seen in a night waking. I knew what Billy was feeling at that time, and could not believe that I was not to be confronted in a moment with a forgotten crime. I racked my brains until my palms sweated to remember what it might possibly be, for I wanted to think up a good lie in time.

'I think you'd better go to your room, Billy,' said Mr. Simister.

'I'll stay if you're going to talk about me. I know you are,' said Billy doggedly, near to tears.

'Go to your room, Billy,' said Mr. Simister, clapping his hands as though to a dog.

'Yes, go, Billy,' his sister added nervously, making a gesture with her hands as if to push him out.

I stared speechlessly at Billy, interested and frightened. What terrible crime had he committed to be treated like this in front of me? I tried to signal friendship with my eyes, but he would not meet them, and he went out looking as a dog does when it is hunted by boys into a corner.

'Oh, this must seem dreadful to you, Leslie,' said his anguished sister, 'but we do so need the help of someone his own age. I'm sure you are a good boy.'

'Billy is too, ma'am. Billy's my *friend*,' I said obstinately.

'Oh, *Billy*,' she said and there was a despairing glance and silence between them. They did not seem to know how to start to talk to me, and I stood there kneading my hands behind my back and thinking why don't they start, why don't they tell me what he's done? Waiting was making my head throb.

'Perhaps if I talked to Leslie man to man,' said Mr. Simister, looking furtively at me from under his thick eyebrows.

'Yes, yes,' said Billy's sister, starting agitatedly to her feet and rushing to the door. 'I'll go to Billy.' I felt very sorry for her.

'Don't spoil the boy, Laura,' said Mr. Simister, 'whatever you do, don't pamper him.'

'*George!*' she said.

There was an awful silence when we were alone.

'You know Billy has no mother or father?' said Mr. Simister, struggling to get to the point.

'Yes, sir.'

'Humph, well his sister and me said we would look after him. He's been like our own boy. We have been like a mother and father to him. I'm sure we've done everything we could for him.'

'Yes, sir.'

I stared with dumb misery at the carpet rolling its interlocking yellow and green rings and squares in my mind like a piece of machinery.

'Well, what do you think of little boys who wet their beds?' he said.



## LOW BREATHINGS COMING AFTER ME

I stared at him in incredulity and horror, a scarlet flush burning on my face. For one moment I thought that some terrible treachery had taken place in my own family. How could he know that? So long ago? surely . . . ? I could not speak until by his embarrassed way of looking at the wall I knew that he was thinking of Billy only.

'Not much,' I whispered, flooded with relief, temporarily, alas, for worse was to come.

'Not much?' he pondered my answer, gnawing his moustache irritably and glaring at me.

'Well,' he said in a low voice, 'nor do I. Nor does anyone. Well, Billy does that.' He dropped his voice, and his face took on a look of unspeakable disgust. 'Does that. And *worse*.'

I could not comprehend. What could possibly be worse?

'Do you understand? Worse!'

'Yes, sir,' I mumbled, though I did not.

'Worse. A boy of his age.'

I was in despair. What was he talking about?

His white face had become red and swollen with anger and his eyes too hot and terrible for mine to dare to meet them. 'A boy like that deserves all the strap he can get.' He caught hold of my arm in a painful grip and was so angry that he seemed as if he would like to beat me too.

'Little boys are very strange: they are more disgusting than animals. If you did those things wouldn't you expect to be beaten?'

'Yes, sir,' I said, going rigid with fear of a beating then and there just for being a boy.

'I'm glad you said yes. I shall tell Billy that. He seems to think he shouldn't be beaten when he does wrong.'

There was another silence. He nodded grimly.

'That isn't the end. He steals. I've noticed coins go off the counter. It's his privilege to work in the shop. Makes a man of him—he can feel he's helping to earn his keep. Leslie, I put a marked coin in a certain place. When it went I found it in his trouser pocket after he had gone to bed. I got him up and beat him as he stood. I'd kill him rather than see him turn out a thief.'

I thought that if anyone spied on me like that I should want to kill them.

## LOW BREATHINGS COMING AFTER ME

'Now, Leslie, I'm sure you don't want a friend like that. My wife and me want you to talk to him man to man. You see he'll have a dreadful future if he doesn't improve. I can't have my wife imposed upon like this, with a really bad boy, and he'll have to go to a *home* for bad boys.'

This and much more was repeated with varying emphasis before I was released with Billy by my side into the afternoon sunshine. Neither of us spoke. We were like strangers, two stiff alien bodies walking side by side in stiff Sunday clothes.

'Let's go to One Tree,' I said and we went.

On the hill was a young oak planted to commemorate the resistance of the Men of Camberwell to the enclosure of this open space. With a lusty show of spirit they burnt the fences time and again—to the devil with enclosures! A dying oak marked the spot where Queen Elizabeth had sat and gazed over the green wooded vales of Camberwell to Saint Paul's. London, large and dirtily sprawling, now washed the shores of this islet. We lay in the grass side by side without speaking or looking at each other.

To my shame I recall that I was filled with an unwarrantable moral superiority. Billy really is wicked, I thought, and I had made a promise to try and reform him. Much of my reading had been evangelist and a spate of juvenile books told me of bad boys who were saved from unnameable evils by the moral fervour of their friends. It was the theme of Sunday school lessons. I would be a 'good influence'. Once again I considered whether I could be his friend if he continued to be so wicked. It was intoxicating at eleven to think that one could place conditions upon one's friendship, and that the conditions could save a soul from damnation. I was quite ready, now the embarrassment of the interview was over, to tread the reforming path so zealously expounded in *Eric*, or *Little by Little*, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, and *Give a Dog a Bad Name*.

'I think you might try to be good,' I said, repeating Mr. Simister's phrase. 'It's not playing the game to your sister.'

'Leave my sister out of this,' Billy said.

('Do be good to Billy,' she had said, anguished and fluttering, as she pressed my hand at the door. 'He does so need a good friend.') I felt so sorry for her.)



'What do you do to make your brother beat you? You must do something terribly wrong, man. Else why should he beat you?'

For answer Billy drooped his head between his arms and wept bitter scalding tears. I was torn between real inner anguish for him and the prim bourgeois feeling that weeping like that was just not done (though I could do it myself in the privacy of my own home, often enough).

'I knew he'd turn you against me. I hate him.'

'Billy, you did steal some money. You've got to see that's wrong.'

'I haven't anyone now. Not even you. Even you are against me.'

He got up and went off down the hill to where the trains ran past. And I knew that he was thinking of committing suicide because I had often thought of it myself after a row at home. Once I had hammered my head against a wall to bring my undesirable life to an end. I ran after him and caught hold of him.

'Where are you going, Billy?'

'You know what I'm going to do.'

The tears were streaming down his face and his eyes looked as though they were already dead. He was lighter than me and I easily threw him to the ground where he began sobbing afresh. I lay down beside him and looked up at the trees waving in the wind and netting the sun and across the honey-coloured haze towards Saint Paul's, and at Billy whom God chose to ignore and leave unhappy, perhaps because he was a Catholic.

'I didn't say I was against you.'

'He's always strapping me. He gets me out of bed when he comes home and straps me.'

Then after fresh sobs,

'He makes me work before school and after. I never get proper time to do my homework. I never get out to play like other boys. I wish I were dead.'

He pressed himself, fair and slight, against the so green uncaring grass. His golden head was very beautiful. I began to be uncomfortably conscious that Billy had a case too. His brother-in-law ought to leave him alone. My father left me alone; he didn't pry. Why did Mr. Simister make Billy work so much when there

was a school rule against it? It was not fair. And to put out marked coins tempting him to steal was detestable. My puny soul accumulated doubts about its reforming role.

'I know I'm damned and I'll go to hell. I don't care. I'll run away.'

'I'm not against you, man. I'm on your side really.' And really I was now. I could not bear his torment and remembered that I too was afraid of Mr. Simister and would not like to live with him.

'I'm your friend and I don't think your brother-in-law is fair to you.'

I put my arm round him, stupidly wanting to cry too.

'Let's go for a walk.'

When he left me to go home to the baker's shop he said, staring earnestly at me with desolate eyes, 'I'll try to be better, honest I will, Les.'

He was so scared that nobody at all would like him.

Two other boys joined our morning walk to school, Dickie Weeks and pale Georgie Boyden. Dickie was a powerful boy whose life was dominated by two things, gadgets and a romantic idea. Gadgets exercised a tremendous fascination for him: almost the first thing he ever told me was how he had fixed a gadget by the side of his bed to enable him to turn the light out once he was in bed (he was fortunate enough to have electricity in his house: I went to bed by candlelight and just blew). As I did not in the least believe him he took me home to show me how it worked. Some time later he fixed a gadget over his bed to hold a book so that he could read it in comfort without getting his hands cold—he was the kind of boy whose hands and feet went as yellow as death after swimming, or in cold weather—and for years he puzzled over a gadget to turn the pages over until he finally gave up when electric fires came in. Then the limit of his ingenuity was reached in fixing a bowl fire on the ceiling with two strings to alter its angle if you became too hot. This finally enabled him to read in bed with perfect comfort. Dickie was the first of us to buy a baby camera and I quickly followed suit. We spent tremendously happy hours developing and printing snaps of each other.

The romantic idea was bravery. If you said to Dickie, 'I'll bet



you won't hold your finger in a candle flame,' he'd set his square face stolidly and put it in just to show you he was brave, though he'd take it out quickly enough. No 'dag'—climbing a drainpipe, jumping off a wall, or walking a fence was beyond him and he would go on accepting dares or 'dags' until he broke something, or tired. He did not say, 'I'm not afraid. I'll show you.' He just said, his eyes lighting, 'Coo flick, d'you think I could?' and went and did it. After a time his bravery was accepted as was my squint, and Georgie Boyden's clubfoot and habit of being sick at awkward moments. A passion for gadgets and a heroic creed led him into the Navy as a wireless operator. I remember he wrote to me from Gibraltar suggesting running a sporting paper on the Rock: I was to supply money and news, he was to take down the football and racing results illicitly by wireless and the paper was to be printed in Gibraltar or just across the frontier. He was sure we should make our fortunes. He became with ease—and inevitably—a pilot in the Fleet Air Arm. I have a picture of him self-possessed among his bunkmates at Leuchar and it was characteristic of him that he should have used his plane to follow birds about and check their flying and diving speeds, the altitudes they reached, and even photograph them and send articles to *The Field*. In boyhood we went on country excursions together with bird and tree books in our pockets. His interest had never flagged even if in the first place it was inspired by a Swiss Family Robinson curiosity about natural gadgets. Perhaps it was predestined that his two passions should lead him to his death on a Yorkshire moor, flying his plane blind in a fog just before the second war began.

At the beginning of the other war when death for an ideal seemed the most desirable and difficult of all accomplishments, Dickie, Georgie, and I—all no doubt inspired by the same evangelical fiction—decided to reform Billy, and used our walks to school to work upon him. I never betrayed what Mr. Simister had told me—I had no words for it anyway—but there were plenty of other spheres in which to exercise a good influence. Probably we succeeded only in adding to Billy's problems, which were many, but what reforming sect ever bothered about that? We were never able to witness the consequences: Mr. Simister took me into his confidence no more and stared at me even harder when he met me:

LOW BREATHINGS COMING AFTER ME

in six months Billy was packed off to his grandparents at Manchester, looking more bereft of hope than ever. From Manchester he wrote me affectionately; as I remember, the letter went:

Dear Les,

My grandparents don't strap me but it isn't very nice being new and not having any friends. I am going to a new school; it is a nice one and I learn Latin. How is the old school and are Dickie and Georgie up to their tricks? I miss them and going out with you. I am trying hard to be a better boy. Please write to me—I am lonely and I would like you to write to me. I am really better and will *never* forget you. Don't forget to write.

Love from

BILLY.

I never replied. In the quiet of a wakeful night I can still reproach myself for the contemptuous moral snobbery that inhibited me, though it is long past remedy.



## Chapter Three

### HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER

Happy he  
With such a mother.—TENNYSON.

**K**enneth and I delighted to dash along the landing and leap down the stairs in two thundering jumps. We both played drums and bugles in the Scouts, and when we ran out of drums to practise on we used sticks on the kitchen table or on baking tins. On Sunday evening the gramophone would play anything we could find to put on it from Florrie Forde to William Tell until even I was sick of it. Quarrels were conducted with the maximum screaming and shouting, even violence. These might begin first thing in the morning. I would lie abed too long and my sister would slip into the bathroom before me, locking the door behind her. My indignation at this injustice knew no bounds; it would whip me out of bed to hammer on the door, 'Come out, you beast or I'll murder you. You haven't any right to go in before me. Don't you know you'll make me late for school?'

We behaved as if we intended to kill each other and when thoroughly aroused I used to throw blacking brushes at her. It is said that I once threw a knife at my brother, taking care to miss. My capacity for noise once put burglars to flight. Waking up one night after Christmas, no doubt deservedly bilious, I yelled for Mother with such might and main that an innocent passer-by would have instantly assumed that I was being murdered. The burglars, who were ransacking Mrs. Brown's, next door, evidently thought so too, and beat a panic-stricken retreat, abandoning intimate articles of Mrs. Brown's clothing in the street, unwilling to get mixed up with a murder. I was much complimented for this, and Mrs. Brown gave me sixpence. So great was the family egotism that we never stopped to think of the shattering effect of our rowdiness on our neighbours. The poor lady down street must have suffered much, for in thunderstorms she would lock herself

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in the lavatory and howl like a wolf, while her much-tried husband stood outside in the rain pleading with her to pacify herself. We must have represented a continual thunderstorm to her.

Mother would pursue dirt with the violence of a soldier in a battle, clattering rakes and shovels and banging the broom into corners. Washing up was a symphony of clattering plates, gurgling waste pipes, and mother's soprano. She sang very much and had to be very unhappy not to sing at the sink. Her voice was sweet and untrained, and in girlhood she had sung in choirs and still sometimes sang when we had parties—showing much bashfulness—and no-one could listen to her without liking it. If I were ill in bed and mother did not sing about her work I would send down a fretful message, 'Ask Mother why she doesn't sing any more!' If only she would sing I knew I should feel better. Presently it would come.

*I've got rings on my fingers, and bells on my toes,  
Elephants to ride upon, my pretty Irish rose.  
So come to your nabob on Saint Patrick's Day,  
Oh jumbo jiminy jimbo, J. O'Shea.*

Mother's speaking voice was a clear soprano. It had astonishing range and as mother's diction was perfection itself, her *sotto voce* asides at concerts and parties rang everywhere above all other voices, often with devastating effect. We inherited from her not only the clarity but the dramatic use of the voice, for Mother described the smallest incidents in her life with the intensity of a survivor recalling the Last Trump. And when Mother came to the door and called one in from street play her sing-singing 'L-e-es-lee' hit the nerves with all the imperiousness of a trumpet call. It could no more be ignored than a clout on the head.

Hanging from the mantelpiece was a green curtain with woolly bobbles on it, always gritty to the touch. To the right of the fire, Father's chair. Along the wall a cheap deal dresser grained in ginger in optimistic imitation of a more expensive wood. Upon a top shelf some vapidly decorated plates and the coloured mugs of two Coronations. The wire and paper roses we bought on Queen Alexandra's Day were stuck into these mugs and stayed there growing dustier and dustier until displaced, or joined, by the next



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year's crop. A motto 'Abide With Me' adorned the space above the mantelpiece. A huge photographic enlargement of Grandmother was hung on one wall. By the door Father had framed his Special Constable squad, of which he was inordinately proud. On summer Sunday mornings before he was called up he would go out cycling to country pubs with members of it and come back extremely merry to flash the carvers skilfully over the Sunday joint saying 'Ah! Aha! Aha!' a great deal and spooning up spoonfuls of what he insisted upon calling the bloody gravy for the youngest children.

Mother's ambition drove her to keep ducks. The inspiration occurred simultaneously to Mother and Mrs. Brown and was not unconnected with the fact that someone wanted to sell some ducks and Mother scented a bargain. The ducks were fetched, in large straw fish bags, which they much resented, being quite content where they were; they expressed their discontent as the two young matrons walked side by side, by leaps and squawks. As they were quite invisible, the tops of the baskets being secured by wooden skewers, the nerves of the pedestrians they passed were liable to be suddenly shattered. Mother enjoyed recounting with all her considerable histrionic talent the hunted looks which came over them when all four baskets, inspired by telepathy, leaped together and the undoubted consternation of dogs, very conservative creatures in the ordinary way, who regarded with superstitious awe a duck in a basket, though a duck *in puris naturalibus* was hardly to be sniffed at.

I could tell at a glance that the ducks did not like our garden. One half of it was given up to potatoes and the other we had fenced off for them and there erected boxes to sleep in. They squawked disconsolately around, ignoring all my offers of friendship, and clamoured excitedly if anyone approached them, fearing more bags.

Now one thing was impossible in our family and that was stand-offishness whether you were dog or cat, duck or child, and we formed a poor opinion of this behaviour. Our interest in the ducks was from that moment reformatory. One thing worried me—the ducks had no water to swim in. I insisted that they would never be

happy until they had some, though Mrs. Brown said she didn't think it mattered as they had never had any in the past, being brought up, she supposed, as land ducks. I listened scornfully and proceeded to dig a hole into which I sank an old tin bath which I filled with water. There was no glad rush. The ducks were just as suspicious of water as of everything else in our household. They would not go near it. Perhaps, I reasoned, they have only thought of water as something to drink, so I cupped my hands and swished some over them. The effect was staggering—they squawked and scrambled out of the way and tried to fly through a neighbour's wall, then huddled against the fence watching me with a pained and mortified expression. From that moment it was war. I cornered them and picked them up and dropped them in the water: they could not have been more annoyed if I had pulled their feathers out. They scrambled out as if the devil himself were after them and no coaxing would induce them to look at it again. They recognized the state of war by setting up an instant clamour the moment my voice was heard or I opened the back door. And if, walking about the back garden, ordering them about, I turned my back upon them, they rushed down on me, necks outstretched, beaks to the ground and nipped my ankles. I would forestall them by waiting until they were nearly upon me and then turn upon them with a howl that made them flee shrieking.

The aggrieved ducks not only expressed their disapproval of us in no uncertain fashion: they carried on a feud through the fence with Mrs. Brown's ducks. The clamour was so great that I could hear it a whole street away. The war, which appeared to make no difference to the supply of eggs, was broken only by the slaughter of the ducks. It was characteristic of the family temperament that when the corpses appeared crisp and brown and smelling like a thousand appetites we regarded them with grief.

Marjorie burst into convulsive sobs. 'Mother! It's the *ducks*!'

'Oh, Mother, how could you!' the boys said and gave way to unmanly tears. We all left the table unable to bear this cannibalism, and Mother, alone with the feast, could not stand it either and left her dinner untouched. The ducks were given away.



## HONOUR THY FATHER AND THY MOTHER

'You always were your own worst enemies,' said my father gloomily on being told the episode.

Much of the background of my mother is lost: I was grievously incurious about it in my youth, and have forgotten the tales told round the kitchen fire about the fabulous childhood in industrial Leeds. Two tiny figures flit through the murk of its badly lit streets in the 'eighties, Lottie and Florrie Burton; scared of the dark, of the 'bad men', of the reeling drunks, of the rough boys with stones, they race hand in hand along the uneven pavements to the sanctuary of the porch and hammer on the front door. Safe inside, relief shows in flushed hysterical giggles. Florrie, at eleven, has her first conversion—the beginning of a religious fervour which was to lead her to become the leader of a spiritualist church in Los Angeles fifty years later—and drags my blushing mother to the repentance rail at a revivalist meeting to make open witness of her sins side by side with lachrymose drunks and wife-beaters. There was only one child in Leeds more imaginative than Florrie Burton, and that was Arthur, and between them they filled the sooty air with the beat of furry vulture wings, conjured kidnappers out of simple yokels in country lanes, convulsed with life the stone angels in churchyards and made the terror of night noises more burning real than the living daylight. Tiny sister Clarrie runs out into the street and is run over by a coal-cart and killed. Mother is too young to feel grief and is not allowed to see the injured body; she gazes fascinated at wax funeral flowers under a glass case. These are sister Clarrie—the flower plucked by God from the garden, an angel at the Lord's side. As a grown woman she can never recall the face of Clarice and grieves because she cannot, with the guilt of one who forgets against her will, but the flowers are never forgotten.

A dog-eared photograph of Mr. Burton shows him as tall and slight with a chiselled face—the small, close-eyed typically Yorkshire face of gentle melancholy: his generous beard is brushed out. He was a sanitary inspector of the City Council and some clerkly letters of his remain in beautiful copper-plate hand. The Burtons were 'superior' people, for a job on the Corporation meant security and respectability. Of Mrs. Burton there is no trace: this proud,



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imaginative, sensitive couple—if one is to judge by their children—passed away while my mother was still a girl.

Mother was thrown out of the security which was just above the poverty line, to make her own way. Arthur joined the Army—a disgrace, my mother said. Orphaned Florrie was violently wooed by a baths attendant at Halifax but ran away from him when she reached Canada. Lottie became a hospital nurse and when she had qualified adopted District Nursing, and filled with gaiety and compassion and that indefatigable nervous energy which was so characteristic of her, lived a lonely hardworking and underpaid life until she married, when she was no longer lonely. At one time she managed a café at Scarborough and never afterwards sat in a café or restaurant without believing she was about to be swindled—‘twopence for that wretched little bit of tart, I ask you!’

Through the years of loneliness there was Freddy, the childhood sweetheart. Freddy was tiny and beautiful with large luminous eyes, infinite in their neuropathic sadness. Not that Freddy seemed sad then, he raced the Leeds streets merrily with his contemporaries, stuck treacle in door handles, tied twine from knocker to knocker across narrow courtways, put tappers on windows and indulged to the full a bent for mischievousness which dazzled Lottie. He left school at twelve, after a period as a part-timer, and went to work in a newspaper office as an office boy. He taught himself shorthand so that he could earn sixpence or a shilling extra by reporting Saturday football matches and so by way of hard work and many changes was able to reach the security of a circulation manager to a Dublin paper and marry the childhood sweetheart. (This was the cause of my being born in Dublin.)

His childhood was continuously oppressed by poverty. His father, a foreman in a Leeds factory, left his proud implacable wife whose imperious temper caused her to be called Lady Paul by all the neighbours to bring up his six or seven children alone. He was an easy man, a singer at chapel oratorios and men's smoking concerts, and domesticity was too much for him. Grandmother Paul never complained publicly of ‘her cross’ nor asked for charity or parish relief—to go on the parish was as great a disgrace as to go to jail—but worked herself to bring up her children, making, mending, and cooking for them long after the day's work was done



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and ruling them with a rod of iron. Her favourite, Edward, 'ran away to sea' at the tender age of twelve and was never heard of again. Another boy developed a tubercular hip and this Spartan woman carried him in her arms two miles every week to hospital for treatment—there was no carriage.

Grandmother Paul, when her work was done and her children grown up or run away, went to stay with a daughter-in-law in Manchester. She discovered upon arrival that the daughter-in-law went out to work and that she would be left to spend her holiday peering from behind the aspidistras of a front parlour of a Manchester suburb, or walk the streets alone. It is typical of her that she felt herself insulted by this hospitality and furiously returned home and was for years irreconcilable.

She was the only grandparent I ever knew and came often to stay with us, a tiny big-bosomed woman with a continual bronchial wheeze, sheathed in black or purple satin like Queen Victoria, whom she was determined to resemble, and with a cross, resolute face and blood pressure. Her heart was failing then, yet she would indomitably set out on walks or shopping trips. Her feet were bad and I have seen her, feet and breath given out, and face the colour of a beetroot, clinging to a gatepost half-way down a road unable to go on or return, saying, 'It's no good, Lottie, I'll die if I have to budge another inch. My feet have given out.' It is said that I, just as full of a tetchy impatience as she, coldly regarded her in such a predicament one day and said, 'Well, you know, Grandma, you jolly well can't die there.'

She liked best of all to sit by our fire and drink tea while my mother sang at the washing-up. 'Sing, Lottie—go on. I like to hear you sing.' She was as fond of my mother as I was, and for this I loved her, but I could not endure to be cuddled by her. Baths in an ancient Leeds back-to-back were not easy. The stubbornness we inherited compelled us to cross swords with her: the stick she carried would reach across the table to whack our nuts, her thimbled finger could make the skull ring. 'Do as your mother tells you now,' she would cry. 'The very idea of standing there sassing.' And then, *whack*. She had aged and was no longer as terrifying as she must have been to her own fatherless children. What was more, she could not run. We dodged expertly round



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the table. 'You're not our mother. You haven't any right to order us about.' Grandmother was game enough to pursue us wheezily but in the end she abandoned disciplinary measures; the new brood was too much for her old heart.

She died with lungs, heart, and arteries gone, nursed to the last in the tiny smoke-blackened cottage in which she had brought up all her children by the youngest and gayest of them, Eva, who was almost of our generation. When the telegram came announcing her death I had my first dread intimation of mortality: she who had seemed as enduring as God, was dead. Now only my own parents stood between me and the same end. 'Ay, she's a grand woman,' her feckless deserting husband once had the gratitude to say. How could you let her die I cried to God in the night, not so much loving her as now fearing for myself. To die, to die, to have the darkness descend and clutch the heart and blot out all, to think that in the morning the milkcart would clatter, the sun shine, the boys shout on their way to school and the newspapers announce in urgent headlines news that could not stir the pulse or raise the smoothed-out brow. The thought was not to be borne.

I never really knew my father. The war took him away as I was growing up and the lost years could never be made good. He was a shy and proud man who found it as difficult as my grandmother to make overtures to the people he loved and indeed his efforts at intimacy with his young egotists were so diffident and tentative that it was only years after, when the damage was done, that one recognized them for the spiritual gropings of a father for a son, for a daughter. After the clouded, tragic last year of his life had ended, I was plunged in grief at the thought of how little I had appreciated or understood him, and therefore, how much even I, who loved him, was responsible for his death.

One would have said of him at the last that he was a weak man. But that was not how he appeared when young. A photograph of him in the 'twenties which hung in the passage showed his large sad brown eyes set in a cadaverous, almost an emaciated face. The jaw beneath is not weak, it is unexpectedly strong, sullen even in its resolution. It is the face of a proud and determined, almost beautiful young man, already marked by struggle. He moved among us



calm and assured, a man who knew he was going to get on. He liked us, but not for our juvenility—that irritated him; he wanted us grown up and talked and wrote to us exactly as if we were grown up. But for all that he was untouchable, he kept back the essential hungry and sentimental part of himself, which through the years stuffed his wallet with cuttings of newspaper poems on love and friendship and trees. No more than Grandma would he make terms, plead for help. ‘They can take it or leave it,’ was his favourite expression. I remember he complained bitterly of the success of a colleague who had shared his office in Sheffield. This man had risen, by bluff and chicanery, to become a great newspaper chief. My father was outraged by this; he could never understand why he had not done as well as this mountebank, for he clung to the belief that if you worked hard and devotedly you got on. He could not accept, without destroying his spirit, the idea that success was largely chance. Nor could anyone as desperate as he to get as far away as possible from the poverty of Leeds ever believe that it was not important. Nor could he apprehend that perhaps it was because he was not a mountebank that he could never do more than reasonably well. He was honestly fastidious, and fastidiously honest, where ruthlessness and unscrupulousness could have served him better. Friendship was friendship, not a means of getting on. He stuck even to friends that were sots; if they had his love he was not going to give them up; they could have his money too, if they wanted it, and drink it and they’d all be sots together.

His clear intelligence, which saw so easily into others’ motives, disdained explanations. If he were wrongly judged he would not bother to argue. If he were passed over he would not plead. If another’s failure gave him the chance to jump his job he drew back, too fine spirited to wish to benefit by someone else’s misfortune.

One tragedy of life is that our virtues become our worst enemies; my father’s contempt of worldliness in the end slew him, for he refused to go on struggling with the world. It was not a refusal he could argue about or justify; it was in his blood. He gave up, and too proud to commit suicide, just died, the bottle obliterating his end. Nothing so incredible could have been

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imagined in my boyhood of so complete and mature a person as Father.

We had a family theory that everyone should help in the house. Marjorie was supposed to dust the furniture (though I can remember doing it myself many times), I ran errands, swept floors, minced the Saturday mince, adding crusts of bread to 'swell it out' (and to get rid of the crusts). But my mother possessed a fine fury of impatience with bunglers; she drove all the servants we had in later years to drink (to use her own favourite expression) by following them round and re-doing their jobs as fast as they left them. We could never get servants to stay as a consequence: they would as lief be chased around by a witch with a broomstick as by Mother, who expected everyone to work at least as hard as she did. This fury chased us.

'Now,' my mother would say, 'I want you to clean the kitchen windows this morning, Leslie.' I would ignore this.

'Budge, honey!' Auntie Florrie would say, glinting over her spectacles and shaking her fist at me.

I would be reluctant to budge; a book, a ball, a comic paper, were at the moment a thousand times more important.

'All right,' I'd say huffily. 'I will in a minute.'

Then, deep in a *Sexton Blake*, I would forget. Presently a slashing and banging would indicate—as they were meant to—that Mother herself was doing them. I would dash into the yard.

'I thought you wanted me to do them?' I'd say, indignant at being double-crossed.

Mother would work on ignoring me. Now it seemed that there was nothing in the world that I wanted to do more than clean the windows.

'How can I do them if *you're* doing them?' I would shout furiously.

But Mother by now had grown interested in the job. She was doing the windows for pleasure, not just to spite me, and this made me more impatient than ever.

'I'll never do them again unless you let me now! You *said* I could do them.'

It was rather like Tom Sawyer and the white-washed fence. I



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would have paid money to have wrested that wash-leather from her vigorous hands, and the affair would advance to the stage at which I would catch hold of it and try to pull it away by main force, not easy, for my mother was very strong.

'Just let me finish this little bit,' she'd plead, and I would let her, threatening extreme penalties if she dared to do any more.

At last she would surrender to my importuning and I would mount the steps and breathe upon the fly specks and rub them out and sweep prismatic curves on the glass.

'Look how bright they are now!' I would shout and Mother would come from the kitchen and admire them enthusiastically. We understood each other perfectly.

It was in the kitchen, when I was ten, that an argument went on in the family for some months as to whether we wanted a baby or not. My mother started it by asking my sister whether she would like a baby sister. I had poor opinions of babies and saw no reason why we should have one. But Marjorie was excited by the idea because she hoped a baby would be a little girl so that she could play with it. I pointed out very logically that a baby would be too young to play with and would not know any games and that by the time it was old enough, my sister, who was eight, would be too old herself to want to play with it. She would not have it so and wanted to know where one could be bought. We knew the fairy tales—that babies were found under rose-bushes or brought by storks, or came in doctor's black bag. I thought all these ways of getting a baby stupid. The earth under the rose-bush in our garden was damp and it seemed to me that a baby left there would very likely die. Certainly one could not always be remembering about the possibility of one's being found there and so, naturally, one would forget to look, in which case the baby might lie there a long time without being noticed, which would be bad for it. So absurd did I consider this story that I never even peered under our rose-bush once. That storks might drop them down chimneys I thought silly. How would storks know where to get babies? And wouldn't babies be cold and uncomfortable dragged through the air? Supposing the baby fell? I knew enough of *The Water Babies* to have formed a poor opinion of the chances of a

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baby in chimneys much bigger than ours. Not only would it be a dirty way of arriving, but it might even be disastrous, for the stork could not follow the baby down the chimney and would be forced to drop it. Our chief chimney led to the kitchen grate and since I often made the fire I knew how small the aperture was behind the bars and I was quite sure that not even a baby could crawl through it. If it came in the winter—or even in the summer sometimes—it would drop into smoke and suffocate or into the fire and burn. And as no-one could ever be sure when a stork might come it would be hard to prevent a fatality.

The most reasonable argument was that a doctor brought it in his black bag. But why, I wondered, should a doctor trouble? Did he charge for babies? I did not know strange grown-ups who gave you things for nothing. For things which lasted only a short time—sweets, fruit, and biscuits—one had to pay high prices. Proportionately then, the price for a baby would be beyond our straitened means.

Locking a baby in a gladstone bag was just cruelty anyway. The little thing would be frightened out of its wits and probably suffocate. Mothers were the only people who understood babies and they would never do such a thing, I was sure. Besides, I had often seen men who were most likely doctors carrying black bags but I had never heard a baby crying in one. All this was the subject of much elaborate discussion which caused my mother to colour like a girl.

A doctor, however, was a clever man, who might, I conceded, have something to do with it. My sister shared my opinion and declared her intention of going down the street to ask for a baby one night. I saw no reason why one should be foisted upon us because my sister had one of her fancies. So when she slipped down the road to tell the doctor I ran after her and caught her giving the message to the doctor's maid. I cried out angrily to the maid, 'We don't want a baby. It's only my silly sister. No-one else wants one, see, and if the doctor wants to bring one he'll have to take it back!' Then, overcome by my rudeness, I ran away and waited up the street to rate my sister on her ridiculous passion.

My mother was plunged into confusion when I told her of this extraordinary event. She did not know what to say. 'Oh,



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Leslie, you wicked boy,' she said, 'shaming me before the whole street.'

'Why,' I said, almost in tears. 'You don't want a baby, do you? What use are they?'

The baby came; though it involved my mother going to bed. I was inclined to blame my sister, and sympathize with Mother. It seemed quite possible that she had gone to bed to get away from the thing.

Our prediction proved right quite soon—my sister grew tired of it, for it was in no condition and lacked the sense to play with her. Helpless and noisy, it demanded constant attention and soon occupied the stage that Marjorie herself, as the youngest for eight years, had taken for granted.

'Oh, she's got a flea in her ear,' I said when she sulked over her disappointment.

If this was not surprising, my own interest was. This stranger, on whom I'd poured so much anticipatory scorn, and which had turned out to be of all things a girl, had personality. It could laugh and cry, crow and gurgle and show delight and affection about *me*, of all people. I grew immensely proud of it and overjoyed at being allowed to take it out in a pram or to amuse it until it fell asleep. A little girl a few doors away named Alice and I played a solemn game with it. We were mother and father and this was our first baby; we were going to have lots more and we walked it round the streets in a quiet rapture.

A year or so later I discovered how babies came and I thought it a vulgar and terrifying method of obtaining them, compared with which the idea of the doctor bringing them in a black bag seemed sane, much less troublesome, and hardly less convincing, and now whenever I was teased about my attempt to tell the doctor what I thought about babies I hung my head in shame and confusion and hoped that grown-ups would not pursue a conversation which, if it went too far, might humiliate them as much as it did me.

I once saw Buffalo Bill in the flesh, when much too young to appreciate it. Was it at Earl's Court, White City, or Crystal Palace? I cannot recall now. And was it really Buffalo Bill? Was he

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still alive then? Or was it some ghostly figure made up to look like him who took the salute in the arena in white buckskin, white hat, white beard, white pony—so that he looked as though someone had thrown a flour bag at him in a joke—or was it someone made up to look like him?

Mother took us to this Wild West Show and we crowded on stages like football field stands and watched a gory drama played out on the turf below, and had an experience like that which Hiram Percy Maxim records about himself in that American classic of family humour and eccentricity, *A Genius in the Family*. Hiram P. Maxim tells how as a boy he was taken to an Indian play at the theatre. He had never been to the theatre before and took Indians very seriously. In fact he disliked them. So when the people on the stage began to worry about the coming of the Indians, he began to worry too. He suggested to his mother that they might escape while the going was good. Out in the street there would be a policeman handy to protect them. With great obstinacy his mother refused to budge but that did not console him at all and when the Indians actually bounded, whooping, on to the stage he made one leap for the aisle and started for the street shouting at the very top of his lungs, 'Come on, Mamma!' And Mamma came.

Now nothing quite as bad as that happened to me. But there down below me was a Wild West homestead and a cattle corral and it was Mother who told me, in reply to my persistent inquiries, that Indians would be coming presently. I had been reading an Indian serial in *The Scout* and like Maxim had formed a poor opinion of them which Fenimore Cooper had not yet had the chance to correct. If they were real Indians would it not be dangerous to stay here? Didn't Mother think that we ought to go and ought not one to warn the people down there who were not protected by fences or anything?

'They're only pretending, you fool,' said my brother with scorn.

Well, that was all right, I maintained, so long as they kept pretending. But would they? They were real Indians and with tomahawks and rifles and ponies the temptation would be just to be real Indians rather than pretend to be Indians only pretending. I doubted their good faith. After all, many a bigger boy had said he



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was 'just pretending' only to give you the mother of all whacks or to play you the kind of trick which showed that human nature was not to be trusted after all.

'Shut up, you baby,' said Kenneth.

'I won't bring you again,' said Mother.

Presently the pleasant Wild West scene of milking a cow and rounding up cattle, drawing water from a well or coddling the baby on the porch was transformed. Someone came riding in like mad, pointing and yelling 'Indians!' and everyone ran around, just as they did in Hiram P. Maxim's play, screaming, which was upsetting. Even my sophisticated brother began to look worried, and Mother, who always implicitly believed in the reality of any play she saw, began to exclaim in concern. So when I asked 'Well, why don't they run away, Mummy? They could run over here,' she nodded, tight-lipped, in vigorous agreement. 'The stupid. The stupid,' she said. 'I wouldn't wait if there were Indians around.'

'I'd run!'

'Shush,' Kenneth said.

Shushing was of no use. The Indians poured into the arena riding their fast, athletic, showy ponies. They whooped and yelled and fired their guns into the air and made their horses rear and were covered with feathers and grease paint and looked as terrifying as a legion of devils. The white people at the ranch thought so too. The men fired at the Indians, but the women screamed and screamed. And the Indians rode around and around in a streaming circle firing guns and arrows and presently they fired fire arrows and one of them ran up and set light to a house *with people inside* and was shot as he got away.

Mother was bobbing up and down in an agony and so was I, but I was most concerned with my own skin and pulled at her elbow. I said I didn't believe they were only pretending, and I could see that my brother had doubts too, and when the woman with the baby ran out of the burning house and an Indian rode her down and scalped her my brother clenched his fists and his teeth and jumped up ready to run down and fight them himself.

'The cads!' he said, 'fighting against women and children. The dirty rotters.'

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And I think he might have gone down to help them while I skipped for the rear if, just at that moment, the cowboys had not poured on to the arena. They whooped and yelled and fired their guns too, and, what was more, they outnumbered the Indians.

'The silly things,' my mother said. 'Why didn't they come sooner? That poor baby.'

Well, we all got to our feet and yelled for the cowboys. We told them they were late, but we instructed them to shoot all the Indians or ride them down and we pointed out which one had run down the woman and baby and we cheered when they put out the fire in the house.

'I just don't see,' I said in a lull, 'why they didn't come sooner. Mummy, they must have known. You knew. Everyone knew the Indians were coming. They must have heard the row too because they were only just outside.' One had been able to see the restless hooves and fetlocks of the cowboy ponies beneath the canvas screen.

'It was terrible,' Mother said. 'They ought to have come and saved that baby.'

Her breast moved up and down in indignation. Her face was red and I could tell she was cross with them. Kenneth was very quiet and pre-occupied. His jaw was set in a grim resolution which boded no good for any Indian he ever got hold of when he was old enough to have a gun.

'I still don't see why they didn't get there before,' I said. 'I would have done.'

It was at that moment that Buffalo Bill or someone like him took the bow. And after that he had the nerve to call out Indians and cowboys together and no-one tried to kill them although both Kenneth and I wanted to do so and Mother declared that she'd like to wring their necks with her own hands.

Altogether it seemed to me an odd business letting the Indians off like that. I suspected treachery and had a low opinion of Buffalo Bill altogether.



## *Chapter Four*

### ‘IN SUCH COMMUNION, NOT FROM TERROR FREE’

**M**y Aunt Florrie—she who had run terror-stricken through the streets of her imagination—came to stay with us in that typical London suburb and added her comfortable body to the group which in the shadows of my mind is always beside the rosy kitchen fire coals. She came to England in the war to work in munition factories and through handling T.N.T. her face and arms were soon dyed a deep yellow, a fact which alarmed me much more than it did her.

She had mercifully divorced the baths attendant and now had, as husband, Uncle Jim, a Slim Summerville of a man, an extraordinarily tall, thin, and friendly Canadian soldier, whose nose was long and red, and whose face was but a continuation of his neck, which was as ropy as a turkey's from the drain of sickness. He was a preternaturally silent man; the fact that a bullet had buckled his gun-metal cigarette case and then buried itself in the testament he carried over his heart had inclined him to gentle melancholy and the contemplation of the nearness of death. He moved as noiselessly as the Red Indians he seemed to be kin to and was always catching me in the act of dipping a spoon into my aunt's maple syrup or cutting a slice of her rich Canadian cake and frightening me out of my wits, yet he never noticed what he had caught me doing, or else thought it did not matter. That he never reported me made me look upon him with considerable affection, which he reciprocated, for he would follow me around and catch my face tenderly between his palms.

‘Your name should be Frank, not Leslie. Guess I shall call you Frank,’ he would say. On another day, ‘You are so straightforward and honest. So direct,’ he would murmur and squeeze me silently to him. It was like being embraced by a grizzly: his rough coat abraded my cheek. His fascinating Adam's apple went up and down like a lift when he swallowed.

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'You have brains, Frank,' he would say dandling me on his knee and caressing me. 'You will be a great man. Only be more calm, don't rush so madly.'

As my mouth was probably full of raisins from my aunt's private groceries I would be unable to reply. Anyway, a reply was impossible. I was too embarrassed. I had had no experience of personal relations with adults; they existed on another plane only to order me about or to serve me. Yet I could read his face and see in it that which made all front-line soldiers stranger to our boorishly patriotic civilian world and felt sad and tender towards him.

'Stay still on my knee. You don't have to go anywhere,' he would say to me, as I was wriggling off.

Auntie Florrie embraced the whole world with ample-bosomed warmth and intense idealism. Her cherubic pink and white face was consciously spiritual. She managed to make even her tremendous jungle of a hat—a cross between a rose garden and a rajah's turban—and her noisy and expensive American clothes conform somehow to an inner standard of unworldliness. We were 'the family', the most immediate representatives of the world, and received the full blinding radiation of her sun. That abundant and determined love overflowed from the people of this planet to those no longer of it. Auntie Florrie had her ghostly familiars, more real to her than the living. She had communicated often, she said, with Clarice—the dead baby sister my mother could not remember—and the child was happy making daisy chains in astral fields and lisping baby prayers and sent her love to Lottie. Lottie was not to grieve. Through Clarice she knew that Edward, the brother of my father who ran away as a boy, was there too and he was very sorry for what he had done and wished to be forgiven. She talked intimately to a Red Indian guide, which was rather more exciting, through whom she received messages from beyond. Quite casually, between bites at bread and jam, or sips at her soup, she would mention a homely message she had received from 'the other side' just that afternoon about how Mother was no longer troubled with the cough that had so much racked her on earth.

Sitting back relaxed in her best American silks, her soft grey eyes with the slight divergent squint, so often seen in the psychic, seeming indeed to gaze through the deal dresser and the green-



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papered wall into the peopled beyond that she knew so well, she would talk to us of astral planes and the meadows and groves where the happy dead wandered, all wickedness and suffering behind them for ever.

Her homely familiarity fascinated me, for I knew what spirits were; the unseen world swarmed like a tub full of eels with ghosts, angels, and devils. What was strange was not that Auntie Florrie believed in that world, but that she sought to communicate with it. For myself, I would not contemplate it without a mounting and nearly uncontrollable terror.

To console me one night in infancy when she was going out to a whist drive (my grief was mostly concerned with the fact that I thought it was a drive in a horse and cart, like the greengrocer's which had two dappled ponies), my mother told me to repeat:

*Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,  
Bless the bed that I lie on.  
Four corners to my bed,  
Four angels then be spread:  
One at the head, one at the feet,  
And two to guard me while I sleep.  
God within, and God without,  
And Jesus Christ all round about:  
If any danger come to me  
Sweet Jesus Christ deliver me.  
Before I lay me down to sleep  
I give my soul to Christ to keep.  
If I should die before I wake  
I pray that Christ my soul will take.*

'Who are they, Mummy?'

'Who, dear?'

'Luke, John, and them?'

'Angels, dear.'

'Are they here now?'

'They're always with you.'

'At night when you go away?'

The full extent of my peril did not begin to dawn on me until the light withdrew itself in majestic flapping golden cloaks with

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my mother as she went tip-toeing downstairs. When, after a long catalepsy of terror I opened my eyes, I was convinced that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were sitting on the flat-topped bedposts, perching on the rails like ravens in the dark on the Tower of London guns and staring at me. I wanted to scream 'Take them away!' but Mother was out. There was only my brother Kenneth, who would scoff, though he would be frightened too, if I was, and my sister who was a baby.

Downstairs there was not even Nellie, the young house-help. Not that she would have been much use. Nellie was epileptic and had once had a fit and fallen into the frying-pan. She also told us that women had cancers which grew out of them like posts and that if they grew too big they had to cover them up with brown paper bags, which gave me a childish horror of meeting strange women. Altogether she was as frightening as a ghost herself.

It is bad enough when there is one terror to face. For most of us there are usually two, that within as well as that without. Whatever shape or face waited for one without, it was nothing to that which rose suffocatingly within, bringing a rigor to the limbs, hammering and struggling under the ribs and demanding an iron resolution lest it destroyed one altogether.

No-one could help in that battle. So I bore the horror in rigid immobility for an eternity till sleep came, stoically hoping that I might escape angelic notice; for if they did discover me, I told myself, they would have my soul from my bones like the shirt from my back and I would be dead before the morning. Ever after I was afraid of the dark and of the spirits which haunted it, and going to the outside lavatory on a dark night or to bed even with a candle, took an effort of will no single deed in after life has ever demanded. My sister was just as afraid of the dark, and as I scorned to admit to any schoolgirl terror, I was forced by my own bravado into the false position of boasting that I was not afraid and compelled to deeds such as filling the coal scuttle in the dark coal cellar or escorting Marjorie to bed and coming down again *candleless* to prove it. There was a touch of the same bravado then in the interest I showed in spiritualism.

If I was afraid of the attention of spirits, Auntie Florrie was well equipped to overcome their neglect. The house was littered with



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mediumistic apparatus, planchettes, sounding boards, and spirit-playing cards (you shuffled out a message, poltergeist raps instructing you which number card to take). We played with this often in daytime when Auntie was out, cheating outrageously to get the result desired. There was a mass of literature—journals such as *Light* and *The Two Worlds* and books which had titles such as *Dead Men Live* and *Life Beyond the Veil*.

Much of the spiritualistic literature was conveniently documented and illustrated so that you were left in no doubt as to what was intended. An artist's interpretation illustrated the angel appearing to the British troops at Mons. Photographs revealed ghosts standing behind the shoulders of men *who were obviously unaware of their presence* or catarrhal ropes of ectoplasm issuing from the mouths and noses of mediums. A haunting diagram showed, by dotted lines, the exact track of the soul in its passage from the viscera in which it was alleged to lodge to the outside world—a journey oddly stated to last fifteen minutes.

There were stories like this:

DEAD SOLDIER LIVES

There was a flash and a big bang and I lost consciousness. When I came to I was not in my body which was lying in the trench in a stiff unnatural attitude. I went up to it but some higher power prevented me from getting near it. Looking at my body with tears in his eyes was my comrade. He was grieving because I was dead. ‘But, I’m not dead, Jack,’ I wanted to say, ‘I’m alive.’ He did not hear me. I went up to him and put my arms round his shoulders and said, ‘Don’t fret, Jack,’ but he did not know I was there. They took my body off to bury it, and I followed it. I could not tear myself away from it. It was some time before I found my way here where everything is so nice, like perpetual sunshine.

‘Has anyone seen the soul leave the body? How do they know it goes like that? How do they know, Auntie Florrie?’ I entreated irritably. ‘How do they know? Tell me, how do they *know*?’

‘Honey, that’s one thing you get to know easier when you grow up. You can’t come to know everything all at once when you’re a small boy. There are more things in heaven and earth,

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Horatio, than are dreamed of in your philosophy. Honey, a man on this earth is only one-sided. He isn't complete; he gets only one corner rubbed smooth. I heard an old preacher in the States say that when a man drinks too much corn licker he gets a one-sided jag.'

My aunt was more Yank than the Yanks sometimes.

'There's drunks that get one-sided when they have more than they can hold. They can't go straight: they bend over to the left or right, honey, and go round in circles. You have to set them against one side of the street or they can't get along. Now man is like that one-sided drunk, my love, the preacher said, you have to set them on the right way before he can get where God wants him to get. I reckon that's the right way it is: each new plane sets man on a new way, to polish up a new gift he didn't know about before, until at last he makes a God-like perfection. That's the way it is, I reckon.'

This was not the answer I wanted at all. 'Mother, Auntie Florrie won't tell me how they know,' I'd shout angrily. 'She just talks about drunks.'

'The idea of talking to a child of Leslie's age about drunks,' Mother would exclaim from the washing-up. 'Florrie, you must be mad.'

'It's just what an old preacher said, Lottie,' Auntie Florrie would say, 'so you can keep your hair on. Can't see no harm in that.'

'Lot of rubbish!' Anglican Lottie would retort.

Then my mother would remonstrate privately with me because I was 'getting converted' to a creed which was 'all lies', and 'against the Church'.

'Auntie Florrie is a fool. Don't take any notice of her.' And at night to Dad, not yet in the Army, 'Our Florrie's a fool. She talks to a child of Leslie's age of nothing but drunks.'

'She must be mad,' said Father. 'All your family's mad.'

'Well, of all the things—all my family, indeed!'

Aunt Florrie was not mad, of course, and more than anyone she would have been hurt had she known the effect all this had upon me, for her kindness was unfailing. She had filled the Beyond for herself with the fireside world, and so made it as comfortable and familiar as an old arm-chair. But into my everyday world she im-



ported the terror of the unknown. Even the sunny daylight hours came under the influence of the sinister and strange. A bearded man half seen in a shadow, a figure that vanished as one turned one's head, filled me with a shuddering apprehension. One might step trembling into an empty room in a strange building and know that just at that moment the Unseen had vacated it. The omnipresent, enveloping Beyond might manifest itself at any moment; it was the felt reality over which the material world was a thin screen. At night the Unseen took possession; the clouds, red bellied from the city's glow, were hosts of witnesses, drowned red and grey shapes from another world. The murmur of the wind in the plane-trees of the road, the scutter of leaves and newspapers in the street, the tugging breath on one's cheek or hair that comes from nowhere to a frightened boy in a lonely bed—these were the spirit witnesses called up to claim me.

*And the dead call the dying  
And finger at the doors.*

I could not believe in their friendliness and I knew that if I thought too much about them, or about this other world to which we were all in the end summoned, my mother and father, my grannie and Auntie Florrie and I, all to be shrouded in grey clothes and, stiff and cold, locked in boxes black as night and put in the ground while our sightless spirits streamed upwards like those of the famous Resurrection picture in the Tate, then I should lose my reason.

It was appropriate that two so interested in the After Life as Auntie Florrie and I should be together on the night the world ended. It happened one Friday in the war while mother was shopping at the Co-op. Auntie Florrie was upstairs in the lavatory, Grandma was having a bath, and I had just begun to write my first story in a penny exercise book. It was to be a full-length story, very much on the lines of Tom Merry and Co. and illustrated by the author, whose portrait I was drawing when my penny ink bottle rose gracefully in the best poltergeist tradition and emptied itself over my book. Beyond the drawn blind and visible through it despite the gaslight, shone a vast and awful sheet of flame. A tre-

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mendous explosion shook the house and made the ground tremble. The tinkling of glass in the silence which followed sounded pleasant, like the clash of the tinklers hung in the hall which made music now, as they did when the wind caught them, or Kenneth and I ran through the hall and bashed them.

'Zeppelins, Auntie,' I shouted, rushing into the passage. 'Zeppelins, Grandma! Are you all right?'

'Gee whizz,' Auntie shouted down. 'I'm all right. Seems to me like the end of the world's come.'

A gust of the supernatural hit me and I shouted up again. 'Come on down, Auntie. Come on down, Grandma, and don't talk silly. Mother wouldn't go out shopping if it was.'

'I'm coming as quick as I can,' Auntie answered. 'You stay right where you are and don't go near that door in case there's anything more.'

'If it's the end of the world they don't need anything more,' I shouted, always most angry when I was most frightened. 'What on earth are you doing up there?'

For answer there was another alarming crash as Grandma, trying to get dried and dressed quickly, fell on the bathroom floor. She thought this was a Zeppelin attack on her personally and cried out for Aunt Florrie.

'Lairdsakes,' said Aunt Florrie darting to her aid. Without waiting for them any more I opened the front door, for the street was full of the sound of rushing feet.

The whole world at the street end was aflame. A great sheet of fire hung in the sky, lighting up frightened faces of the people running towards it. I was filled with panic at the sight of them; there was something eerie in their absorbed surge towards catastrophe. Thus people might run to take refuge in God if the end had come.

'What's up? What is it?' I screamed at them.

They did not wait to talk. They pointed to the flame which stood like judgement in the sky.

'Wells'!' they shouted. 'Wells'!'

Wells' was an explosive factory just across the railway line. It consisted of a lot of small tin sheds dotted along the edge of a golf course. It can't be Wells', I thought, it's much too big.



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My aunt joined me, holding me firmly by the collar as though I were a dog that might bolt.

Grandma, still shaken and complaining, followed her, clutching the door in case another one went off.

'They say it's Wells'. I don't believe it,' I shouted.

'Just look at that,' my aunt said calmly, joining the people who were staring rapt at the beautiful and immense aurora over heaven. 'It may be Wells', but personally, honey, I'd say a prayer right away. I wouldn't put it beyond God to put an end to this wicked world at any time.'

My aunt's calm consideration of the matter was as infuriating as it was frightening. God just would not let the world end while Mother and Marjorie were at the Co-op. All the same, if you thought of the earth as being as flat as a biscuit then it looked indeed as though one edge of it had caught fire and before long we should burn too. If, on the other hand, you thought of it as a ball which was on fire in the middle, then the flames which had burst through the crust not very far away might at any moment run through the garden path under my feet. I saw both possibilities with terrifying clearness and lifted my feet alternately, gingerly and surreptitiously feeling them to see if they were hot.

'Mother!' I said to Auntie, thinking suddenly that Mother might be in it. 'And Kenneth?'

'God will look after them,' Auntie said.

'Not if He's ending the world,' I said.

Mrs. Barratt who lived down the road and whose son Bertie went to school with me, collapsed moaning at our gate. Aunt supported her while I went for a chair and a glass of water.

'My son Teddy, my son Teddy,' she lamented when she came to. 'He's at Wells' to-night.'

'God will watch over him,' said Auntie, rosy with confidence. 'Just pray.'

'My poor Teddy, I'm sure he's gone,' the old lady wept. 'I know I'll never see him again.'

I knew Teddy, and had played cricket with him, and I wept too, but I was sure Mrs. Barratt was unreasonable in being so certain that he was dead.

'It isn't Wells'. I'll bet it's Woolwich Arsenal,' I said. 'He

'IN SUCH COMMUNION, NOT FROM TERROR FREE' must be all right. I'll see,' and though my aunt shouted to me to stop I ran out of the gate and joined the stragglers after the main mob which had gone towards Wells'. When I reached the station it was plain that Wells' was unhurt. The railway banks were dark and quiet, and the peaceful, wooded One Tree Hill beyond, with its square church tower was redly lit by the fire from the east.

When I told Mrs. Barratt, she said, 'D'you think my Teddy's all right?' 'Of course,' I said angrily, but as I took her arm and helped her across to her home she kept muttering broken-heartedly, ignoring all my assurances, 'My poor Teddy, my poor little Teddy.'

As there seemed to be no immediate likelihood of a repetition of the disaster, Auntie Florrie gave me permission to run down to the main street to meet Mother. I ran through streets crowded with people watching the eastern light and assuring each other that it was Woolwich Arsenal with the certainty that a short while ago they had been saying it was Wells'. I passed a gesticulating old gentleman with a prophetic white beard and silver hair bearing a paper banner inscribed 'Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.'

'The end of the world has come!' he was shouting and the crowds went hushed and respectful as he passed. 'It's the end of the world,' he cried. 'Repent! Repent!' We all thought suddenly of our unforgiven sins.

I fell happily and excitedly on my mother, brother, and sister when I found them. God had spared them after all: God had looked after us.

'Well,' said my mother as she stood in the kitchen unpinning her hat. Her eyes were shining with excitement. 'Well . . .' She searched with all the drama of her nature for the most telling and appropriate words.

'What happened in the Co-op, Mum? Tell us,' I urged.

What had happened was dramatic enough. The lights had gone out and the women went hysterical but Mother climbed on to the counter and shouted to them to behave and ordered the manageress to light some candles. Mother was not ready to tell this yet. She searched for an overture to the drama.

'Well! The lights went out and the whole sky was filled with



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one sheet of flame and I had the funniest feeling. "Lottie," I said to myself, "it's the end of the world."

Black headlines in the morning papers told us that the munition works at Silvertown had blown up and Monty Law, who sat next to me at school boasted that all his windows were blown in. 'Over my bed, too,' he said eagerly, 'and me in it.' 'Coo,' said a neighbour, 'd'you go to bed as early as that? What d'you think, men, old Lawy goes to bed at seven with the kids.'

Everyone jeered at Monty who blushed deeply and bit his lips and did not know what to say.

'I never go to bed before ten,' I lied, anxious always to be in the right swim. 'At least, hardly ever.'

A broad little man no taller than my mother, of military bearing, used to visit us on Sundays. He had sandy hair, well greased and brushed, and a twirled waxed moustache which stood out in two aggressive spikes. Before 1914 those spikes had pointed to heaven, but the unpopularity of the Kaiser had forced him to reject the vertical in favour of the horizontal rig. His nose had been broken in his youth and that gave his flat face with its pale blue-grey eyes (very much like Auntie Florrie's, even to the look in them) a pugnacity his nature was far from possessing. There was nothing of the sergeant-major in his soul, martial though his appearance. His clothes were scrupulously neat and well fitting and he had a taste in weskits and neckties decidedly fancy. He was hardly ever seen without a carnation in his button-hole. He might have been, yes, a retired coachman who had done well for himself, or a bailiff or farm steward or head gardener. You could tell by his boots and tweed suits and sunburnt face that he was no clerk or counter-jumper but a man who worked in the open air. But he was no steward, gardener, or bailiff: he was not even a successful pug, he was a dustman and my uncle; the same Uncle Arthur I had threatened to bash with a poker if he 'mucked about with my leg'.

Looking back I detect an understandable family tendency to gloss over the dustman side of his life and to divert our attention to the polish he got on his boots as being much more worthy of interest and emulation. Did anyone refer directly to refuse-collect-

ing? I cannot remember that they did. Arthur was said to ‘work for the Borough Council’. And in time his job did become quite as genteel as he could wish, first as foreman and then ‘something to do with the destructor’. Or talking made it so.

My Uncle Arthur, whom I loved more dearly in childhood than any other visiting grown-up, lived a life of utter and disastrous failure. He had nothing left except what Robert Nicholls’ writing of the soldier calls “‘A soldierly bearing”, by which is meant a stern continuance of personal integrity in one who has forfeited (and who is well aware that he has forfeited) every private preoccupation and hope . . . the crystallization from within of a surface due to the action of spiritual endeavour and moral endurance.’ Which is very well said, and when you apply it to my Uncle Arthur it means that the more desperate and untenable his personal affairs become, the more lovingly he polished his boots, the more closely he shaved, the more nattily he groomed himself before leaving his squalid house in the little turning off the St. Leonards Road, Poplar. And by virtue of this inner courage he was able at last to triumph over his circumstances.

Like my Uncle Edward, my Uncle Arthur ran away to make his fortune; but while Edward just vanished leaving a haunting uncertainty behind him as to the fate of one so young and tender, Arthur came to London whose streets were paved at least with opportunity.

Mother would say to questions—‘Foolish—foolish, your Uncle Arthur’, and shake her head and push out her hand to thrust away the memory of whatever boyish scrape of quarrel had driven Arthur from the Sanitary Inspector’s home in Leeds. But his trouble in Leeds was nothing to the trouble shortly to come on him in London. What happened to him I do not know—one imagines him walking the streets quite destitute and boyish pride driving him to enlist rather than go back home. For how long did he serve? There are no means of knowing: in later years he had woven such a web of fantasy round his life that his own accounts were not reliable. Not for long, for he had two boys in the Army before 1914—they would turn up at our house occasionally, sullenly resplendent in scarlet and pipeclay and sit angular and huge and monosyllabic drinking tea in the kitchen—which sug-



gests early marriage. 'I've no patience with our Arthur for marrying that Martha,' Mother would say when not feeling charitable, and 'Our poor Arthur has his cross to bear, heaven knows,' when she was. For Martha was Uncle Arthur's cross. Like many another young man before and since, he was caught and nothing if not chivalrous, married the girl. Martha was less a girl than a catastrophe. She could neither read nor write, and to total domestic incapacity wedded a passion for gin and stout which grew with the years.

Struggling Arthur married to an East End slut was shackled to a tiny dwelling in a Poplar back street. A fastidious man in everything he did and said he had to live in squalor which made the home he had left in Leeds not so long before seem like paradise lost. He could not be my mother's brother and not possess imagination and I who visited his home only once cannot guess what he suffered when he returned to it every day. The blackened wallpaper peeled off the walls, the reek of cabbage, the rose of poverty, filled the hallway. The neatness of my uncle's personal possessions against this background possessed a pathos of which I was quite conscious even then. To the initial inevitable poverty Martha contributed her native fecklessness.

Arthur might come home to find the gas shilling spent on stout and the house lit only with candles or not at all, or discover himself threatened with ejection because after the loss of many a week's rent (my aunt 'couldn't imagine where it 'ad gorn', she had just 'left it on the dresser') he was hopelessly in arrears. Or find no washing up or cleaning done, no meal prepared and the kids running wild, and then set to himself neatly, methodically, to do the household duties, to chase Martha's kids to bed and then, proud and dapper little man, make the round of the St. Leonards Road pubs looking for a drunken trollop he hated the sight of, and half carry home a woman who was maudlin and sick by turn and turn about.

Occasionally his cross came with him on his visits to us, a spectacle Uncle Arthur clearly had difficulty in owning. She was tall and spare and angular, an awkward gowk of a woman, always on the titter. Her nose was red and bulbous and her eyes nervous and watery. Her hair escaped over her damp face and her head danced

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continually on the stalk of her neck. As a child you had to watch it because you imagined that all those bobs and jerks and nods had some meaning or intent, but they had none.

She had no sort of control, even with us, where she was always on her best behaviour. If we wrestled with Uncle Arthur she would explode with shrieks of laughter and shake with mirth like a ship in a gale.

‘Smack his bum, Arthur,’ she’d say. ‘Go on, don’t min’ ’im, smack the little beggar’s bum!’

My mother’s disapproval of this language was so intense that an iron family resolve was concentrated on preventing Martha from exploding. It so exhausted us that we took Uncle Arthur out of the way to play with him. For a glass or two of beer and the most simple joke would send her into a fit of giggles as though she were a schoolgirl and lead to a tearful crisis. It was with some relief that we would see Uncle Arthur lead her off home, her black satin best skirt somehow inevitably slipping, her blouse gaping somewhere—for many as were the black buttons that adorned it, an essential one was sure to be missing—her Cockney feather boa raffishly waving and that black hat with its inebriate black feathers and shining black beads fastened on to her head like a burnt-out pie-dish with huge beaded pins, threatening unmistakably to fall off before she reached the tram stop.

Uncle Arthur’s solace was his imagination, which enabled him to lead in his inner privacy the kind of life he was sure he deserved but from which an unjust fate had cut him off.

‘I see they’re after layson officers out there, Leslie,’ he’d say quietly to me. ‘Fancy I’ll have a shot there—my French is pretty good—Polly voo Frongsay, Leslie, polly voo Frongsay? They need a chap like me. Someone with military experience. Confidentially, you know, I was out in France for some time—special mission for the Army—Bong juer, mussoo, bong juer. Nice country, but there’s no place like the old country.’ And if the subject was flying machines. ‘Well, of course, I knew Bleri-ott. I mean I suggested he should try for the prize and—I met him in France—he said, “Arthur, me lad, I’ll do it if you’ll come and see me land!” “You must think me a fool, Looey, if you think I’ll be missing,” I said, and I wasn’t.’



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'But I thought Bleri-ott didn't know what day he was going to fly?' I said, for we had *The Boys' Book of Aeroplanes*.

Uncle Arthur would ignore this, and sail on.

'Never let a friend down, Les, that's one thing you must never do.' He would award me a soft hurt glance.

'You didn't know I was there, Leslie, I suppose? Came in as gracefully as a bird—bit difficult, though, getting over the cliff—that plane was too small to climb—not like the ones we've got to-day. Look, here's a photograph!' He would produce a much-folded cutting of a newspaper photograph of Bleriot after he landed. 'Look, that's me there, Les,' and his blunt tobacco-stained finger would smudge away at some already unrecognizable figure in a deerstalker with its back to the camera. One had the feeling he had poked his finger at it a hundred times already. 'Bit unfortunate I'd got my back to the camera. Didn't know he was taking it. Of course I had my own camera there and some good photos. Pity they got smashed in the jolting of the car on the way back—nice Daimler that was—I can drive one you know—the Daimler firm accepted an idea of mine to improve it—gave increased power with less petrol—should make a packet out of that. Only the poor men easily get cheated. If ever you grow rich, Leslie, and there's no saying you won't, smart boys like you and Kenneth, never cheat a poor man, cheat a rich one if you like, but never a poor one. Mark my words, Les, the poor get the backside of life all the time.'

Effortlessly his fascinating inventions poured out. They linked him with Kitchener, Joffre, Lloyd George, Bleriot, and all the other great, even the young man who shot down the Zep. at Cuffley with Uncle riding pillion.

The years passed and the poverty did not ease, for Martha's shiftlessness squandered what promotion and security of employment gained. She grew publicly quite unpresentable and eventually he came alone to see us, a little the worse for wear with his bronchitis and heart trouble. ('Blame West Africa for this, Les—those years on the Niger') but as immaculate as ever, smiling happily on us, glad to see us grow to the stage when we could take a glass of beer with him, fixing one with an eye humbly pleading to be believed as he embroidered his latest adventure for you.

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'Yes, they're going to present me with the Life Saving Medal, they say, Les.'

His happiness came after the death of Martha, though it was short-lived. Retired to Southend on his pension he married again and was blessed with a son. When the scare of war came in 1938 he became an Air Raid Warden, then presently quietly died.



## Chapter Five

### 'THENCEFORWARD ALL SUMMER IN THE SOUND OF THE SEA'

Our life was play, and holidays were ordained to play in. Obeying some law beyond our ken, we moved with the regularity of the seasons from conkers to 'London', from 'London' to 'Base', from 'Base' to iron hoops and skates, from skates to tops, and, sweating through the summer cricket and release, came back once more to football, smoky bulls-eye lanterns and winter-warmers.

At Christmas we prayed for snow, and Kenneth played the violin and I recited 'Gunga Din' in the Scout concert. At Easter we dug up the allotment and the garden, went three times to Church on Easter Sunday in new stiff clothes (for at Easter one had a new suit if the family could afford it) and on Easter Monday went the first excursion of the year.

Of the summer holiday a fortnight had to be spent at the seaside or one felt as though life had cheated you at its peak. Perhaps two wartime holidays were not spent at the sea; the first was certainly the year that Father joined up, and we had no money, and the second when we spent a summer holiday with him at Hemel Hempstead where, sporting a bombardier's stripe, his only promotion, he had become an instructor in signalling.

In the park-land we watched the troops drilling, and thrilled at the galloping gun teams limbering and unlimbering, the kind of military sight we had only seen before in pictures on almanacs. We haunted the smithy in the High Street, astonished to find what a mighty man with large and sinewy hands the smith was. We worked the bellows which blew the powdered coal to an incandescent heat. With a hammer my eleven years could not even lift, the smith smashed the white-hot iron bars, drenching us with sparks, and beat them into horseshoes before our awed gaze for the beasts that waited calmly in his shop. The sweat ran into his

beard like rain. His torn rag of a shirt was drenched with it and he might just as well not have worn it for all the covering it was. The sweat poured down, making gullies through the dirt, into the hairy mat of his chest and belly. His shoulders were knotted and roped with muscles like a python and his biceps stood up in great balls. As he set the anvil clanging the muscles whipped like agile snakes across his frame, a sight to see, oh, a sight we were ready to wait all day to see! He would pick up the hind hoof of a cart horse strong enough to kick even him into the street and with many grunts and curses pull it about as though it were a toy until he had it resting contentedly between his legs, then he would shave off chunks of horn to provide a surface for the shoe. He would thrust the hot shoe on to the hoof and the smithy would be filled with the nauseating stench of burning cuticle. I shuddered to feel the hot iron as though it were on my own foot, yet wanted to be as strong and as brutal as the smith and trim a horse's hoof and grow muscles that would enable me to hammer even masters on sight. One by one the nails which protruded like iron fangs through his beard would be dexterously spat into place and hammered home.

A weather freak provided us with an argument for many years. As we stood in the High Street, one side of it was plunged into rain while the other remained bathed in hot sunshine. We ran from rain to shine, and shine to rain, whooping like savages. The freak obsessed us with a problem in logic. Could it really be said that it had rained in Hemel Hempstead that day? One half of the town would say yes and the other no. Perhaps it had rained *in* Hemel Hempstead, but not *on* or *over* Hemel Hempstead. This led to many long discussions about similar problems. What, for example, would be considered rain? How many drops? A shower of rain might produce less moisture than a heavy fall of dew.

Going home I put my head out of the carriage we were in and saw, when the guard blew his whistle, the engine and the first coaches start while we stood still. That was a lovely problem. When was a thing moving and when was it not? For here were we standing still in the station while the train we were in was moving. Though we moved in a second or so, there had been a space of time when it was possible to say that half the train was in motion and half was not. One might say the same thing about stopping.



The engine stopped first of all and then the carriages piled up on it, sometimes so hard that we jumped back. That was a better problem still—the driver would say that the train had stopped while we were actually going backwards.

Then, take sleep. It was impossible not to see that sleeping and waking were absolutely opposites, but just try and trick yourself into finding out the exact moment when you slid from one to the other. There had to be such a moment, yet it was impossible. If Kenneth asked me in bed, 'Are you asleep, Les?' and I answered 'Yes!' that was considered a great joke, for the point about being asleep was that you never knew you were, a very unsettling thought when you saw that there were whole stretches of your life you knew absolutely nothing about. Yes, there was even the problem about life itself. If you were alive, then one time you had *not* been alive. Then you were born, which meant that there was a moment when you were not alive, then a moment when you were alive. Being alive was so important that anyone ought to be able to notice the difference between the two and could be sure to remember it. But nobody did. I did not remember it myself, to my great annoyance. Indeed I could not possibly imagine a moment when I had not been alive. And if I could think of dying, I could not think of 'being dead'. These arguments produced the uneasy sense of unreality I felt when I straddled across a county boundary as an infant and said, 'Now half of me is in Kent and half in Surrey—which county am I in?' When I got too speculative, my brother grew extraordinarily irritated and kicked my behind and said angrily, 'Put a sock in it!' If the foundations of existence did not worry him, my voice did.

For the remaining years, by some miracle every summer, we spent a fortnight in a cottage at Westgate-on-Sea, or in grimy lodgings at Southsea, or at Eastbourne, the place which Mother loved most. I cannot now imagine how this was possible financially during the war years. We never had any money. Mother maintained a family of three, and presently four, then five children, all lusty, hearty eaters and great wreckers of clothes, on the meagre separation allowance plus an occasional pound a week out of the 'business' (what were left of Dad's London agencies in Fleet Street). I can recall Mother complaining at one time that the

'business' owed her thirteen pounds, which was a fortune to me, and to her too, indeed.

Yet somehow we were all transported to the seaside, with never a penny from any charity and fed just as well as at home and not kept on an impossibly short rein where pocket money was concerned—we might not be able to afford seats in the pictures or shillings for excursions, but there were always coppers for bathing boxes (if the law insisted on them as at Eastbourne) or pennies for ices, chocolate, and cups of tea. It was made possible by the strictest economy for months before and the 'Co-op divvy'. Mother or Father, or Auntie Florrie would go by excursion train one Sunday after Easter to book up apartments. We could seldom afford board, but took rooms and Mother did her own buying and sometimes her own cooking. If the excursion should fail Mother was quite equal to taking us down on chance and dumping us on the beach to play while she went and found a place by her own exertions.

We cared nothing then for the miracles our parents performed. The mistress of our thoughts was the sea. In the train we could not eat the masses of food Mother had prepared for the journey as if for a siege. We dashed from side to side in the carriage, shouting from the windows, gazing at the curving downs, the golden wheatfields, the strange newly minted earth which greeted us outside the town, a pageant after the dingy streets. We waved to the children. We watched the wires fall, fall perilously from the telegraph poles only to be snatched up again and so to be handed on, falling and lifting, all the way from London to the sea. Even that was miraculous—that they could make a piece of wire really as long as that. We got train-sick, we wanted the lavatory. But it was all only the exciting overture to the sea. The thunder of the rails, the hoot of the engine, the rhythm of the wheels—'I said I would, I said I would, I said I would,' added an urgency to our thoughts. As though, if we did not hurry, it would be too late.

And then, from the train window, a world washed with a new light which dripped and rippled even from the eaves revolved majestically past the train; buildings and bridges surged towards us, glittering with sun, scaled with gold, a curtain of poplars flashing silver and green streamers in the breeze slid by, and between the cracks and the gaps of them we glimpsed a long low sheet of



silver, or a smoking wall of blue, or just a grey, misted, sun-soaked immensity.

'The sea! The sea!'

We beat frantic, agonized hands against the window. Why did not the train stop, or slow down so that we could be certain that this all too brief vision had not betrayed us?

Presently we were there, sniffing the salt, toiling with our bags up to the lodgings and dropping them the moment we dared and shamelessly leaving all to Mother so that we could race to the front and have 'a proper look'. We would run up the hill—there was usually a hill—and we knew by some play of the sea light on the stones that the sea was just over the brow—and we ran with the sense that unless one ran as hard as possible now, at the very last, one would be cheated of this moment towards which the whole year had circled.

'There it is.'

'The sea! The sea!'

We stopped. It was a moment of disappointment. It stood up from the edge of the town, grey, unsurprised, unfathomable, lifting a formidable, curved wall into the sky—as though indeed the earth must be round for so much of the sky to be occupied by the sea—and from this distance unmoving. But then our eyes were drawn to the fretting and lacing and flashing by the beach, to the movement of people, to the blowing white tents, to the black dots which were the bathers, to the sunny gleam of pebbles and sand. The tang of salt and seaweed tickling our nostrils and the sea wind whipping at hair and knees evoked a crowd of rapturous associations.

'Look! Look! The tide is in!'

'Come on!' Kenneth would shout. He believed in running, it was one of his disciplines and away we would hare after him, threading through crowds, past shops, dodging vans, while Marjorie yelled with fury at being left behind, and jump on to the beach and dash down to the water's edge, only restrained from throwing off our clothes and swimming there and then by the recollection of Mother's threats and the presence of so many people, especially girls. In tired wrinkles and green-spotted flecks of foam the sea expired at our toes.

'We'll just have a little paddle,' said Kenneth, 'instead.'

‘THENCEFORWARD ALL SUMMER

Father first showed me the sea at Bridlington when I was beginning to toddle and Marjorie was still in her pram. I was undressed in the open—an unprecedented event—and put into red and blue striped pants which had to be hoisted under my arm pits before they would stick, and shown the sea. In so many words, ‘Look,’ everyone said, ‘here’s a nice shaggy dog to play with. You must learn to play with it too. You’ll like it.’ It was true that it was playful. It was like Paddy, the Irish terrier, leaping around. It had a white mane, and people of extraordinary bravery—my father, my brother—walked into it and allowed it to leap around them and bark. It pawed at the sands and growled.

Clutching my father’s hand I walked forward bravely to this enormous dog and trampled on it, surprised to find that it was cold, and not solid. Yet it was rough and strong, and you could not stop it like Paddy by banging it on the nose with a slipper—which always made Paddy sulk under the table—but it came up and around your middle so coldly that one yelled, and while you had your mouth open to yell it took your breath away and stood up quite suddenly and thrust paws on your shoulder, tumbled you over and swilled down your throat.

I yelled and yelled, preferring Paddy, who was not half so wet and tasted much nicer, and ran out, but remained curious about this monster, and dismayed by the thought of meeting him again (family conversation ‘You’ll get used to the sea *in time!*’ suggested an alarming intimacy). By the time that I was eight, under the encouragement of my father and brother I had mastered it and swam without fear.

Once at the seaside we had no urge to go anywhere. We did not want excursions or amusements, we went only to the beach to bathe and make sand-castles, to play rounders or to wander along the water’s edge seeking stones and shells and starfish. And all Mother wanted was a quiet place out of the wind to read *John Bull* and to work out the Doublets or the Railway Stations or to deal out the food her insatiable nestlings were always clamouring for. She loved to listen to the band, or to watch the pierrots, but she preferred not to pay. What indeed had she left to pay with? When Father was there she would go out after we were put to bed for a Guinness and perhaps to a show. And when Father



was not there her loneliness must sometimes have been great, but of this she never complained.

Towards the end of the war when Kenneth was already at work, there was a pierrot troupe on the shingle at Eastbourne which all of us watched quite often, though mostly from the railing of the promenade. That year I had put myself into training to swim the Channel, not only because one ought to start young for so great a feat but because hard sea swimming would help me to get the championship of my school. I imagined too that one day I might have to take my own life and had decided that to do so I must swim out to sea, far out of sight, until I could swim no more, for it would be humiliating either to drown or be rescued within sight of land. By this method of suicide I thought the will of God might be discovered, for if He wanted me after all to go on living He could contrive to have me picked up by a passing vessel. And that would prove a command I should never again want to resist.

The pierrot troupe was not very great shakes. A fat man sang 'I said I wur shy' and 'Oh my goodness how ashamed I wur' and a baritone sang 'Friend o' Mine' and an elderly lady sang 'Sister Susie' and another song which involved a lot of winks and nods on her part and blushes on mine, about kissing in the park in the dark. And they all did a play in which one of them shot the other with a blank cartridge for making love to someone else's wife. And then there was the girl. She was not much older than I. She was no taller, certainly, and much slighter and she had pale straw hair and blue eyes and a pinched saucy face. Her voice was husky and enormous and common. I *liked* it for being common. She fascinated me. I stared at her, watching the way she sniffed into her tiny handkerchief, or crossed and uncrossed her legs, or tapped her fingers, or winked at someone in the party. She must be very clever to act on the stage, I imagined.

She came on first in her orange pierrot costume and sang 'Just a Song at Twilight', which always brought tears to my eyes even when she was not singing it, and for encore she came back dressed in Dutch costume and sang:

*Little Mister Baggy Britches, I love you.  
If you'll be my Sunday fellow,  
I'll patch them with purple, with pink, and with yellow,*

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*And folks will say-ay, da da da da da da da*

*Greta's been patching his britches*

*Till he's got no britches at all.*

At this point she would turn her back on the audience and flip up her dress to reveal long Dutch pantaloons with a large red patch on her bottom. This was very vulgar and it used to annoy me to hear people laughing at her, yet I could not help laughing myself and always used to go along to watch her do it.

Her great hit was 'Sergeant Daddy, V.C.' My cousin Enid, who was on the halls, sang this song. A child star in 'Terry's Juveniles' and herself an orphan she had sung it through all the music halls of England, melting the hearts of a nation, coming to the footlights, tenderly clad in a nightdress and hugging a teddy bear, and stretching out her arms to the world and singing:

*When my dad comes home again,*

*Never more to roam again,*

*I'll be proud to tell the crowd*

*That Daddy belongs to me-ee.*

Enid, a most cheery soul, had now come to live with us, and she sang this in her bath or while she was dressing or at any time and I disliked it. Yet when this girl with the husky voice sang it, I was much overcome. She seemed indeed the sort of girl who might have a Sergeant Daddy, V.C., which was luck hardly likely to come to an ordinary boy like me. And when she stretched out her arms to us, mine ached to stretch out to her with an impulse almost too strong to resist. I dreamt about those outstretched arms and her face swimming between them.

I lounged about the pierrot enclosure in the time I could spare from swimming, listening admiringly even when the wind was cracking the canvas with pistol shots and the rain had driven all but those hardy ones who cowered under umbrellas from the enclosure, and I took to following, at a discreet distance, the performers to their lodging house to watch the girl with whom I was in love.

It might be that she would drop a glove I could gallantly restore, or perhaps toughs of the kind Oppenheim wrote about



would dart on her to kidnap her for the castle of a foreign prince and then I could dash in amongst them and lay them out without sparing my blood. Not by any easier method than heroism did it seem possible to win her liking.

I was soon to discover that I was not unknown. As I lingered in the evening wind after a show, hanging over the promenade railing watching with unblinking concentration for the slightest sign of her, she came out muffled up to the neck in a grey mac, with a scarf over her hair and a glimpse of white childish socks about her ankles. Escorted by grown-ups circling like tugs about a white royal launch, she came up the prom. steps, and her small pinched face went up haughtily and I heard her say petulantly in a grown-up tone, 'Oh, holy smoke, there's that boss-eyed boy hanging around again. It's about time he bought himself a ticket, does he think we live on charity?'

I looked round for the boss-eyed boy.

There was only myself.

My cheeks grew hot and I turned abruptly and walked passionately away, down to the sea, so angry and ashamed and insulted I could have thrown myself into it and drowned there and then, preferably within sight of her. It was terrible that people knew I had no money, could tell so easily that I was poor. It was terrible to see myself through her eyes as something so contemptuous and worthless. In the dusk I hit myself hard blows on my chest, my arms, my thighs, like a madman. 'I could kill myself,' I said. 'I could kill myself.' My rage was so great that I could hardly speak normally to anyone that night.

I stayed away from the pierrots, but then I seemed to see her all the more. She was always turning up unexpectedly in my path, and I would burn in my cheeks and look away, conscious of my bad clothes, my untidiness, my surliness, my eyes. To avoid her I would detour along the shingle, or even turn on my heel like a coward. Yet to swim I had to sink my pride and to pass that way, and one morning I came down to swim when the red flag was flying to warn bathers off. She was leaning on the promenade rail in her grey mac talking to her troupe and the wind was blowing her hair and her mac.: her beauty made me angry. She must see me, I thought, with my costume and towel under my arm and know



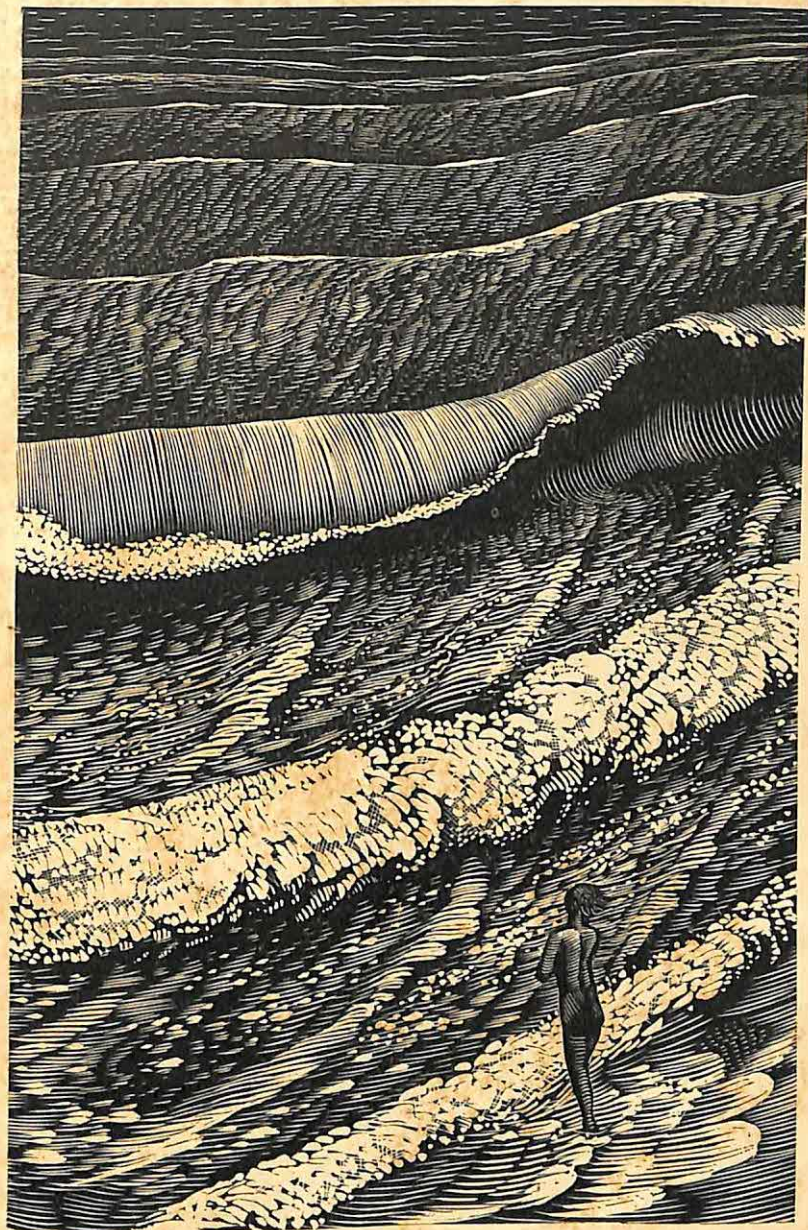
that I am going to swim (imagining that she was as conscious of me as I was of her) and so was instantly determined to swim despite the red flag, for to have been thought a coward would have been the last humiliation. Far better, if necessary, to drown.

The sea came in with thunder. The swell did not look too dangerous from a distance, but close at hand one saw the waves hunch their shoulders and hang poised for a moment over the beach before exploding. They were muscular, battling waves ranging long and trickily into the shingle, foam boiling within their glassy surfaces. I stood watching them, measuring them, with the familiar tug of fear and excitement inseparable from swimming at any time heightened now into real alarm. Yet I had swum in rougher seas, I believed, and as if to confirm me there was a local boy going in to swim, buttoning up the shoulder of his costume as he danced gingerly down to the sea. With such dignity as is possible on shingle, I walked to the tent feeling that the girl's eyes might easily be cruelly measuring me from behind.

When I came out, masking the holes in my worn-out costume with my hands lest the girl should be watching, the local boy was already beyond the breakers: buried every now and then by a comber which overtopped him with its smother or sunk into a trough out of sight, he bobbed up each time as unsinkable as a spar, shaking his mole-like head, resourceful, intrepid, battling his way out to easier water.

From my first plunge I knew that the sea was beyond the ordinary. It came without evasion, hustling me off my feet, clamouring angrily past to pound in a blinding white flurry on the beach and storm back with an accelerating roar dragging the shingle after it. To get beyond this broken water involved an immense effort. Putting my head down I struck into the depths of the next wave swimming as strongly as I knew how, and so foot by foot, mounting crest and plunging into trough and swimming into rather than over the crest so as to gain something from the undertow—for a wave is often like a spillikin, when the top falls forward the base is thrust in the opposite direction—I made my way after the other swimmer, determined not to be less audacious than he. It was magnificent beyond the breakers. The immensity of the sea one rode made one long to shout at the glory, yet denied you the







opportunity. I hoped that the girl was watching. The waves of the swell were well spaced, for they came out of deep water and one mounted each broad swelling whale-back, streaking its bottle green with chrysolite of one's own wake, and lo, one was lifted imperially above the sea, to glimpse instantly the promenade, the tents flapping in the wind, the cliffs, the gulls, the unperturbed people making holiday beyond the sea and to whom all this terror and purpose and power was only an accompaniment to their lives, a background noise. And then down one went, swooping into the lonely trough and without pause another monster rose to blot out the sky and devour one.

Presently it was tiring, then speedily exhausting, for one was constantly forced to watch, to judge the speed of the coming waves, to be prepared for the smother of white horses—and by some trick they would break suddenly into smother after smother—to judge with finesse the point seaward beyond which one dare not go lest one lost the energy to return and the point landward which would bring one again within the pounding of the broken water. The coldness sapped one. And the sea, which was still running in, was growing even stronger. Yet pride forbade me to turn for land until the other boy did. He caught sight of me and waved and sank and came up again and it was plain that he was blowing heavily and was hard pressed, his streaming face distorted under his flattened hair, his eyes glassy. I trod the water and backed to the seas and waved and splashed and tried to shout something encouraging, but I had no breath and the thunder of the sea overwhelmed my effort. And the waves caught me out, buffeting me at an angle with a froth of broken water which sank me. When I saw him again he was wrestling wearily, cunningly, back to land. Then he was lost again, then rose again, then lost for such a long time that I was overcome with panic lest he be drowned and feeling alone at the mercy of the terrifying sea struck blindly back.

When I glimpsed his black streaming head again I swam more calmly. The sea resisted now my return as it had resisted my going out. There was definitely a strong undertow, the unmistakable tug of which was about my legs and I was frightened lest the tide should already have turned or I be caught in one of those cross-currents which were said to surge from Beachy Head towards



Crumbles. I put my head down and bored forward with limbs which were leaden with fatigue and came at last on the broken water close to the local boy. And this was more frightening than ever, for one saw so clearly now how the power of the combers was making the shingle flow. Back with the broken water after each wave tumbled a cataract of pebbles with the noise of a train entering a tunnel. The sea had pulled us down the coast and was driving us ashore at the point of the worst water. If, getting out, one floundered in that scree too long, down on one's back would come another breaker, armed with pebbles and weighty enough to knock the breath from your body and drown you. The other boy did not like it, and was holding himself for an opening. We were tangled together a moment, and tried to grin, and pushed apart and hung on the very wave-tops waiting for one—the seventh one—on the broad back of which we could glissade to the safety of that point where the water spent itself. Time and again, by trickery rather than strength, I turned back, unable to face the boiling, yet when I saw the other boy go flying down, lost in a cloud of spume and spray I was filled with complete despair. If I did not try now I might never get out, and I took the next wave, striking forward on its crest with all the strength left in me. But it was a short one and it plunged into that dizzy riot of returning water and shingle, pinning me within it and I felt the weight of the pebbles hammering my back and slid on my hands and knees in the grinding mass, and then was lost, submerged, buffeted and suffocated in a swirling green and white universe which was pulling me towards the bed of the ocean. A desperate voice within was urging me to swim, to *swim*, and I struck out blindly and was rushed madly forward and broke suddenly into the light of day, on my hands and knees once more and safety within scrambling distance. I do not know how I scrambled.

Out of reach of the fury I lay spent. A few yards away, as still as driftwood, was my companion. My limbs were all weight. They had no life, no power of motion. They were just as they were the first time I was nearly drowned—in the swimming baths when I was ten, on which occasion someone else had to dress me because I was so weak. I put my head on my arms and spewed out the bilious sea and shook my head to get rid of the tumult in my ears.



When strength began to return I crawled up to my tent and lay trembling and feebly towelling myself until the power to dress returned.

Peeping beneath the tent brailing, I saw the girl with her back to me and to the sea, the same wind blowing her, the same people talking to her and the clock only half an hour later in time than it was that other life ago before I had tried the power of the sea.

If I had drowned, she would never have known.

Slowly as I dressed a tide of renewing life began to flow within me. The blood beat warmly in my veins and I felt snug in my clothes. The sensation of heat was so strong that I was surprised to find the skin cool to the hand. Beyond the flying tent flap the sea was flowing more swiftly, now that the tide was beginning to ebb. Truly an awful sea, and beholding its proud combers racing like four-abreast charioteers to certain disaster I could not understand how anyone could possibly have swum among them, mastering them. A tiny core of exultation came a light in me. I had done it, *I* had done it. The core became a rosy coal, then a furnace of delight. How strong I was!

She could not have done it. A girl could not have done it. A girl would have drowned unless rescued by someone like me. Nothing more certain. Oh, I was terribly strong—stronger than any *girl*. The conviction gave me courage and I made up my mind that when I passed her now, on my way to Mother, I would give her a scornful glare, to show her that nothing she might say or think of me made the slightest difference. Alas, she was no longer on the promenade.

In the corner out of the wind, Mother was sitting, just as I knew she would be, on one mackintosh with another around her to keep off the cold. How I loved her! The sun had browned her face and about her eyes new fine lines were engraved from puckering against the sea light. I towered above her with my legs apart and my hands in my pockets, self-consciously tough.

'I've been in swimming,' I said casually. I was as tall as my mother and as strong. Marjorie was in a corner making a grotto out of white shells and tresses of seaweed, and little Joan was filling a painted bucket with pebbles and solemnly emptying it out again. It infuriated me to think that anyone could go on doing that



contentedly for a whole fortnight. I was stronger than my sisters. I was a man and they were only babies.

Mother blinked uneasily at the sea.

‘Looks cold and rough to me,’ said she. ‘Hope you were careful. Hope you dried yourself properly.’ She gave a tiny shudder. ‘Someone walking over my grave. There’s some tea in the thermos. Goodness, what a sight your hair is.’

Gulping down the hot tea, tasting the salt on my lips, I felt a tender solicitude for Mother, for the whole family. They needed a man to protect them. The tea made me sleepy and I lay down on the mackintosh beside Mother and put my head on a towel. In this sheltered spot the roar of the sea was muted and I fell asleep instantly.

When I awoke it was dusk and colder. I was so bruised and stiff that it was hard to stand or bend and help Mother, who was gathering her things together to go home.

‘Do you want a bun, Leslie?’

I took it. The jam inside was gritty with sand, but I was too hungry to grumble.

‘Oh, can’t I have one, Mum?’ wailed Marjorie. ‘I only had half a one.’

‘Shut up, you,’ said Mother. ‘You had a chocolate biscuit.’

I stepped away to look at the sea. The pierrots had begun the evening show and the girl’s husky, confident, common voice was asserting from far away

*I’ll be glad to salute my dad,  
Sergeant Daddy, V.C.*

Barely to be heard above the buffet of the wind and the thunder of the retreating sea came another sound, faint but tremendous, from across the water. A vibration deeper than the wind, more definite than the formless slurring of the sea, a trembling of the earth that one could not be certain had actually been heard.

‘The guns!’ I said. ‘The guns in France.’

‘It’s the sea,’ Mother said, looking anxiously at the water.

‘It’s the guns,’ I said. ‘An offensive.’

Forward from Mother’s corner, on to a spit of slithering shingle, there the sea took possession of the whole world. The white turbu-

## IN THE SOUND OF THE SEA'

lence beat on the coast as far as the eye could reach, a girdle, a spray-spitting tumult. Far out the white horses rose, arched their green necks and shook their white manes and drowned into the greyness. On the horizon the gold and apricot and rose of the dying day streaked the scudding clouds, and upon the land and sea dwelt a light that made me catch my breath and tremble.

Then again the undertone of distant concussion, indefinable, yet not the sea.

'The guns!'

The guns drew me as much as the sea, of which I was equally afraid. I wanted to go where the noise was and win a V.C. and give it to my dad. And I watched him rise, beyond the surf, on the dappled mare on which he had been photographed recently, a shining bandolier across his breast, his spurs gleaming, rise and fill the arc of the sea and ride silently towards me, the Victoria Cross on his breast.



## Chapter Six

### AFTER THE BATAILLE AND DISCONFITURE

The pilours diden businesse and cure,  
After the bataille and disconfiture—

CHAUCER

**T**he declaration of war was as splendidly unexpected as an extra half-day in term-time. It seemed to promise an indefinite extension of the breaking-up spirit. We certainly hoped that no-one would bother to inquire any more as to whether we had got our sums right or done our homework.

'I don't see why we all can't fight,' said Jack. 'I don't see what they want school for in war.'

'If I had a German in front of me,' said Billy, 'I'd punch him.' He pivoted on one foot, curving a clenched fist through the air.

'I'd strangle him,' said Jack.

'I'd *kill* him,' I said.

We stared fiercely at the empty asphalt playground, challenging a German to appear.

'Even if he was an Uhlan,' said Jack.

'Especially if he was an Uhlan,' I said.

'After I'd killed him I'd take his horse and gun,' said Billy, 'and ride off to the war.' He stared with a blind bright wonder at the silver spears and green banners of the poplars advancing over the hill. We followed his gaze and were silent.

We painted the Belgian flag on glossy gilt-edged cards and wrote on them, 'Gallant Little Belgium', or we twined the bright flags of the Allies round the edge of the cards and printed 'The Allies' and 'England Expects' for centre pieces, and we sold the cards to each other or to our relations for the Red Cross. We begged recruiting cards and posters from the recruiting office opened near The Chandos, and all the war a card of Nelson silhouetted against the murk and blaze of Trafalgar hung in our kitchen. I much admired it. Father subscribed to a weekly history

of the war and we pored over its coloured plates and pictures and learnt about the Russians and the Serbs. Billy and I lay for hours in dark alleys watching windows to catch the people who were signalling to Zeppelins and on Saturdays if he was not working in the shop we followed anybody who had a beard and a bag, certain that he was a spy. We broke into empty houses and shops in which it was likely that spy centres might be formed and left decoy messages written in the language the boys' papers and Herbert Strang gave us to understand a Fritz might speak. These messages invariably began with 'Gott Strafe England' and fitted in a 'Donner und Blitzen' or a 'Gott im Himmel' where we thought they would most conveniently go. We drilled a street gang and a neighbour gave us a silver bugle with three notes to blow. When I discovered that it had been 'Made in Bavaria' and that Bavaria was in Germany, full of a private virtue I smashed it flat.

Our elders were still more resolute. There was a German baker's shop I passed on the way to Cubs and it was much talked about; boys whispered with sinister knowingness that a gang from Deptford had sworn to come and 'deal with it'. I arrived the night they kept their oath. The plate-glass windows were smashed and the glass crunched under the heels of the attackers who moved like phantoms in a whirl of white mist from the burst flour sacks. It was as uncanny as a dream, the slow deliberate destruction, the snow-draped figures looming and disappearing in the milky light, all footsteps and sounds muffled in flour. A window went up slowly and the white sofa thrust itself out obscenely, ridiculously, jerking up and down, wriggling to free itself and to sail with no sound on to the sacks and slither into the gutter. The flickering light—oh God, was it fire?—was redder through the screen of flour than a street lamp through fog. The one cry and the silence which followed hurt the pit of the stomach.

At the street corners in the grey dusk the women, a dark, silent crowd with faces that moved no more than the white heads of flowers in a border, a crowd that grew imperceptibly larger, thickened and closed slowly. The tension in the air electrified one's spine and caused the hair to prickle and the spirit to ache with misery and fear.

On the following Sunday at the Scouts' Church Parade a girl



## AFTER THE BATAILLE AND DISCONFITURE

rushed into the troop and gave a tall college boy, who was wearing knee-breeches, a white feather. The troop hissed at the insult. The boy turned red, then white and very quiet and next day ran away to enlist. He was sixteen and was ashamed when they sent him back.

In the weeks that followed, the gangs which had looted German shops, having got a taste for the thing, brought hammers and crowbars, cold chisels, and axes and systematically smashed a brickworks to pieces. It did not belong to a German. It did not seem to belong to anyone. They did not bother about that. They liked wrecking, and here was something very substantial to wreck. Great energy and determination were needed to smash in the roof of a kiln, prise down massive brick pillars or uproot rails. Weaklings need not apply and for a lad to succeed at it he had to be prepared to give the whole of his time, which is what very many of them did. They had their own idea of what the war was about.

The war clamped slowly down, the lights were gradually obliterated in the streets and in our lives. Prizes vanished from schools, sweets from shops, and playgrounds were fenced in for allotments. We could not really approve. Bicycling policemen, whistling furiously and bearing placards inscribed 'Take Cover', heralded the Zeppelins and brought us from bed to the kitchen fire to drink cocoa and to play snap and to pretend that we were not afraid of the noise of guns and bombs. The ineffectual Zeppelin menace was succeeded by the terror of the Gothas, the drone of which can never be forgotten. A barrage in memory louder than that of this war pursued them.

Father had been called up.

'Don't worry, children,' said Mother at the louder bangs, well aware that our bravado and excitement were the reaction of fear. 'Don't worry, God will look after us. God will take care of us.'

'At any rate we're all together,' said Kenneth grimly, 'if anything happens.' Then he bit his lip and blushed. 'Except Dad, I mean.'

'Mrs. Barber was sick in the Wesleyan crypt last night,' said Marjorie with a sleepy shudder. 'Catch me going down there.'

'Wesleyans are little more than barbarians anyway, I guess,' said Auntie Florrie. 'I wouldn't feel spiritually safe.'

'It's better in our own home,' said Mother, watching us with

loving solicitude, ready to fold us under her, slight though she was and collectively bulky though we were, like a hen protecting overgrown ducklings, at the slightest menace to our roof-tree. 'So long as you just pray.'

'Amen,' said Auntie Florrie. 'Amen, amen.' And all around as she prayed, the heavens opening in all the clamour of Miltonic war.

After Father was called up we were poor, and Kenneth and I went to work. I earned my first pay when I was eleven, working all Christmas Eve delivering fish, poultry, and vegetables for the local fishmonger and bringing home at night one bright shilling and two pounds of withered apples. Bright-eyed with pride I handed the whole shilling to Mother and the apples were saved for the Christmas feast. That must have been the Christmas we had almost no money and the only present anyone of us had was a china swan or camel with a hole in its back stuffed with five silver-wrapped chocolates. I know there were five for I rationed them out to last my Christmas Day.

Kenneth went to work for the local butcher, and earned three or four shillings every week-end. Boys who worked for grocers in the evenings, as well as on Saturdays, were known to take home as much as five or six shillings. I followed my brother's lead but did not really like it. The day was long and tiring and there was always some well-fed woman with a hysterical poodle, who would come in about seven o'clock on a winter's night when you were sitting half asleep on the boys' bench hoping to be allowed to go home soon, to ask for 'a quarter of suet and chop it, please'.

'Shall I send it, ma'am?'

'Oh, yes, please, if you would.'

And I would blunder dispiritedly off into the unlit darkness carrying a heavy butcher's basket (in the fullness of the daily rush it might be two, both heavily laden) containing only a couple of chops, or a little suet, and grope about shrubberies and gates in dread of dogs (who thought of meatily flavoured butchers' boys as juicy bones to gnaw), and Auntie Florrie's spirits to find a servant's entrance where some hustling female snapped, 'You're late. Where've you been?' 'We can't keep dinner all night,' a protest meaningless to me who had dinner in the middle of the day.



## AFTER THE BATAILLE AND DISCONFITURE

Kenneth, fortunately for our meat supply, took it more stoically and kept on with the job after I had deserted it for less practical, quite unpaid, but more romantic work in hospitals in my spare time. With customary Paul determination I was prepared to defy raids, neglect friends and scouts, and leave homework undone to undertake this.

Yet it was Kenneth who first took me to a military hospital. As smart as a bandbox in our scout uniforms, hat brims ironed, we presented ourselves at the lodge gate. The beginning was not auspicious. Our sacrificial patriotism did not seem to be appreciated. The janitor of the lodge was not impressed with us, while we were awed by him. He did not so much question us as examine us with massive eyebrows which worked independently of each other, like adjacent elevators. He pawed the air around us with them, smelling us out. We presented a pass—how on earth we'd got one I don't know—and he was still unimpressed.

'H'umph!' went one eyebrow, wriggling skywards while we gazed in fascination, and 'H'umph!' went the other after it, in a hurry to catch up. 'Dunno what they wants you 'ere for. Damn noosance, kids.'

We heard a wooden leg go alarmingly clump, clump in the dark recesses of the lodge (after reading *Treasure Island* I found all one-legged men sinister) and we waited dismally, imagining Eyebrows communing with superior powers about the disposal of us. Then with a clatter that made us both jump, up went a little window and Eyebrows was framed in it, a savage, disheartening picture.

'Don't look lika coupla dolts,' the Guardian shouted. ''Ere—tyke yer pass!' A horny hand thrust it through the window and my brother took it timidly but firmly. 'An' yer gotta be out uv 'ere by eight or yer'll be locked in!' He waved a hand at the expanse of dripping shrubbery, and the frosted winter cabbages beyond, and the vast coffin-like hospital riding the December fog like a ship adrift. The thought of being *locked in* frightened us considerably but in no way discouraged us. If you were a scout you had to be prepared even for disasters like that.

'Look slippy nah. The matron is keeping tea for yer. It might get cold.'

As we knew nothing as yet about matrons this witticism was

## AFTER THE BATAILLE AND DISCONFITURE

lost on us. It seemed quite probable that she was waiting for us as she had signed our pass.

'Will you tell me where to find her?' asked my brother earnestly. 'I'll apologize for being late.'

'Tchal!' said Eyebrows, and spat.

Chastened, we entered. Before we had gone many paces the Eyebrows were at the door again, regarding us. We looked at them apprehensively. Had they changed their mind?

'Nah, look 'ere,' he shouted, exasperated all of a sudden by the sight of us. 'If I lets yer in, yer behives yerselves. We 'ad some of your sort 'ere before. Chiced arahnd that shrubbery they did. Trempled over them petaters they did. Didden let 'em in no more.' Then as we still waited, 'Wacha wytin' fer. Didden I say yer could go in?'

'Yes, Guardian,' we said. We knew he was a Guardian by the brass plate which said

### LADYWELL WORKHOUSE BOARD OF GUARDIANS

'Well, git.'

We got.

'Bet those chaps weren't our scout troop,' said my brother fervently when we were out of earshot.

We were to help with the Christmas decorations and climbed about wards hanging up paper chains and holly. Yet things did not go as they ought to have done. Nothing could disguise the workhouse. The electric light bulbs seemed too feeble to brighten the long echoing stone corridors, the decorations were absorbed into the background of institutional browns and greens. The soldiers were not heroes after all; they were exhausted men from the flooded trenches of France. They lay miserably in bed suffering from trench feet or fever and not disposed to be merry and enthusiastic with small boys because it was the eve of Christmas. We were oppressed with the atmosphere of defeat.

The climax came when the man in the kitchen who was serving out pint china mugs of tea for me to carry round, started to grunt and groan and pull at his collar. His face which had been human and even talkative a moment or two before was contracted and



congested now and his eyes rolled frenziedly to escape whatever it was that had so suddenly attacked him. The mug crashed and the tea streamed over the floor. His whole body was seized with a violent agitation which made me tremble in sympathy and I watched his face and even his hands changing colour, become deep hued, purple, black.

I ran shouting for the nurses. When I got back with them a fight was going on in the ward kitchen. He was on the floor now his teeth savagely clenched, throwing himself about with tremendous violence and several blue-clad bedmates were wrestling with him, trying to hold him still and jab a spoon into his mouth to stop him biting his tongue off. They had jabbed his mouth so hard that they had cut him and his darkened face was smeared with blood, a streak of blood floated in the pool of tea on the floor. After a long fight they got him, rigid and unconscious, to bed.

'Come away,' said Kenneth, pulling agitatedly at me. 'He's having a fit.'

'Epileptic,' said a soldier. 'Poor b——r.'

'Did he give you a fright?' said the nurse with a white hard smile.

'I want to go home,' I said, trying now to prevent my face puckering up the way it did when it was going to cry. 'I want to go home. Take me home, Ken.'

Presently we put on our coats and made for the door. The decorations could go and hang themselves. We could smell the cold London fog and nerved ourselves to tramping down the long drive through the cabbages and potatoes and past the shrubbery of Eyebrows' lodge. But when we got outside there was no drive. The night was all of one piece, a turgid darkness, yellow like clay stirred in water, where lights shone upon it, black and choking a few paces from them. Hand-in-hand we plunged into the fog, confident that at least we had the huge protective bulk of the hospital behind us. But when we looked back for comfort and reassurance that too had dissolved and we were abandoned completely and only my brother's equally frightened hand stopped me from panic.

The silence was tremendous. It shut down over one until all that could be heard was the racing of the heart and the half-heard roaring of the blood. A fine wet film covered us. We felt the

gravel of the path beneath our feet and walked continuously forward; then without warning we stumbled on soft, spongy earth from which cabbage stalks poked at us and tripped us. My brother's hand—all I knew of him for he was invisible—held me from falling. We turned to the right, sure the drive was there, but still the clinging earth was under our feet. Then, panicking, we plunged hurriedly forward and lashed ourselves against the clammy, dripping limbs of laurel bushes, a shock that made us cry out in horror.

It was as we stood ashamed of our panic that I heard water, the hurrying suck and chatter of the absorbed rush of a cold unseen river. I could read in my brother's check upon me that his thought was mine—the Ravensbourne. I could not remember whether there was a wall or a fence shutting us off from the river or whether it was possible to walk straight into it. If we did we would die though we both could swim. I began to pray, reciting the General Confession, which was all that would come to me. If God would get me safe out of this I would never steal or lie again, never, dear God. Trembling we turned away from the sound of the water. We hallooed, a quaver in our voices, and edged stealthily forward through cabbage stalks again, and so for an age, it seemed, going forward a foot or two, then halting and shouting: we had sense neither of time nor direction. Then at the moment of our despair, when I was accusing God of forgetting me, our feet grated on the gravel drive. We halted, not knowing how we were oriented, hallooing still, until a muddy eye bobbing up and down in the fog signified a man with a lantern. It was Eyebrows.

'Tremplin' over them petaters,' he said. 'I might have known.'

The bus we caught crawled like a Jules Verne submarine along the sea bottom. It bumped continually against the kerb and for a long stretch an invisible conductor walked in front to guide an invisible driver. On the main road we hitched ourselves on to a slowly grinding procession of trams. And so home, to the smell of baking, to the exciting thought of Christmas in the morning, to my mother's face, relieved of anxiety now that we had dispersed by our presence the disasters her imagination had conjured up, rising and shining like a benediction from the sizzling hot range.



## AFTER THE BATAILLE AND DISCONFITURE

A sensible boy would have been cured of his ambition to help in hospitals on winter nights. I was not sensible. God knows by what wartime precocity gifted, I reasoned that men in a surgical hospital would be better to help than the men in the medical hospital. I simply transferred my allegiance to a hospital which treated only wounded men.

One of the first patients for whom I fetched and carried was a miner, Eagle from Paradise Row, in Staffordshire. Legless he wheeled himself about in an invalid chair with the gloomy savagery I was in after years to see Charles Laughton repeat in *The Silver Tassie*. When first I saw him he was a broad hulk of a man stranded and helpless in a hospital bed, weakly telling his story to the man next to him.

'Ah didden know they were goin' to tak' it off. Ah didden know nuthin' about it, ah didden. Ah'd passed out. An' there I were when Ah come to, wi' a splittin' headache an' a bit far away and swimmin', but nought the worse and cosy in clean sheets, which were the first bed Ah'd seen fur a long time, tha knows. All of a sudden me left foot started ter itch. It woulden stop, tha knows. An' Ah brought me right foot over to scratch it properly, like tha does, tha knows, an' Ah fumbled about fer a while an' Ah cudden find it. An' then Ah knew they'd had it off me. . . .'

He paused. 'Tha knows Ah cried like a child.'

Then after another pause, 'Reckon Ah'll not go down a mine again.'

Listening, I felt an unaccountable guilt about it all and used to approach Eagle almost ingratiatingly lest he might suddenly turn and blame me. Was it something in his eye as he watched all of us pass him who walked still on two legs?

When they dressed Eagle they put the screens round his bed and one day as I was passing the jolly V.A.D. nurse with the beetroot face and pince-nez whom I very much liked, called out to me to fetch her a bowl of water. Innocently I walked round the screen with it and placed it on the locker. There was blue-jowled Eagle sitting up in bed holding up the severed stump of his oak-like leg, as raw as fresh-cut beef.

I walked away without a word, trying not to fall, hoping no-one would see me, praying to God not to let me faint and out in the

open, under the pear-tree, threw myself down and wept, remembering again the story he had told.

A man came into our ward one day, a Taffy, in a state of weeping melancholy. No-one knew his name. They had found him wandering dazed and half-clad behind the lines, his identification disk lost, his only property a service hymn book, which he still had. He was unwounded and could walk about and eat, but he took no notice of anyone, weeping softly to himself or singing hymns in a clear Welsh tenor.

The men introduced me to him. They were more amused than sorry. 'He'll get his ticket all right,' they would say. 'Taffy! Taffy! Doolali tap,' they would say to him, sympathetically tapping their foreheads.

I was full of grief for him for I had seen so few grown-ups weep, and never a soldier, and I would sit by him often.

'Taffy,' I would say, 'tell us your name.'

He would be silent.

'Come on, tell us,' I would coax him, touching his hand. 'You must have a name. What about your folks? I'll bet they'd like to know where you are.'

He would look at me with sly cunning, get out his hymn-book and as pleased as a child to be noticed walk up and down the ward singing. That was as far as anyone got.

Then one day he was gone. He had got up in the middle of the night, gone into the lavatory, taken off all his clothes and sung hymns. They battered the door down and took him weeping away.

Germans came to the hospital. Two houses were put aside for them, one for officers and one for men. The men were very bad, the wounded British Tommies said, and a lot of them died and sometimes I would catch a glimpse of the trolley wheeling a dead one to the mortuary under a shroud. One night after seeing this, I climbed up the mortuary drain pipe and looked in, my hair standing on end at my own temerity, only to see nothing but a vast chest of drawers which seemed too small to contain bodies. I was annoyed about this.



Not all the Germans died. Some crept on to the balcony overlooking the green on which grew the pear-tree. Inert, pale as albinos in their wheeled chairs or spinal carriages they blinked as timidly as white mice at the autumn sunshine and presently as they grew stronger, leant over the railing, their shaven polls gleaming in the sun, and looked down impassively on the lime-washed dwarf apples hung with fruit like lanterns, on the neat rows of currant bushes, and on me on my swing. The pear-tree and the swing were two of the joys which drew me to the hospital, for I had them to myself. Unable to resist showing off, I would pull the swing into action, its wire ropes creaking, and when it was soaring and dipping with that splendid motion which leaves the stomach behind at every drop, I would climb cautiously erect on to the seat in which position one could get a far stronger purchase on the wires. Now the inspired swing would fly until at the tip of each arc the seat was higher than the cross bar. At this point—carefully, lest I dislodged myself—I could touch the boughs of the pear-tree and bring the ripe pears tumbling to the ground.

‘Pfirschen!’ the Germans would cry and clap their hands like little children watching a conjuror at a garden fête. They were encouraging me to fool about in front of them.

This patronage enraged me. I had resolved a long time ago to kill a German if I could, and here were Germans. Alas, I could not get at them and had nothing more than pears to kill them with. And they did not seem to be expecting me to kill them, even though I wore scout uniform, which made me more than half a soldier. They were not afraid of me at all.

Worse humiliation, when I clambered down from the swing I was not in condition to kill anybody. Too much swinging made me black out with giddiness and sometimes it made me physically sick. On the swing I would never admit this, sharing the desperate family resolution to deny all human weakness. But the ground would not obey me, nevertheless. Once down upon it and it continued to rise and fall and swoop as if I were flying still. The faces of the Germans swung past like a succession of pallid moons and maybe I had to sit down, or cling to the pear-tree for support, and the Germans laughed. Just for laughing I wanted to kill them all over again.

As soon as I recovered I seized the rottenest pears and hurled them at the balcony. The men dodged them, laughing gleefully like boys let out to play, showing white teeth and pink tongues, an especial happiness in their eyes. If they caught a rotten pear, and its brown rottenness bled over their hands, they laughed too and I was ashamed.

'Bravo, Pfadfinder,' they cried.

'Huns,' I said under my breath and turned angrily away. Behind me I could feel them smiling at me. Their intent gaze stung my bare neck, the crooks of my knees, the small of my back like a spray of hot sand. It was like having nothing on and I could feel my whole body blush. I had to turn and face them again, but casually, as befitted one of the conquerors. If I could not kill them, a Saladin of modern war, I would humiliate them.

'Here you are, Jerry,' I said, trying to be lordly and patronizing. 'Catch!' I tossed the crisp pears up, a handful at a time. They turned, glittering and riding in the sunshine. Hands flashed and caught them, but some pears rained down again, smashing on the stones and railings and thumping on the turf. German teeth shone as they bit deeply, greedily, like animals, into the whiteness.

It became a game and the war receded to nothing, to a dream. They laughed with the rolling helplessness of children caught by an irresistible contagion. It was only funnier if the pears hit them. I laughed too, at first, sulkily and unwillingly, but just as helplessly in the end and with a sudden unsummoned gust of friendliness blowing treacherously through me.

'Bravo, bravo!' they cried. 'Noch mal!'

'Bitte schön, kleiner Kamerad.'

'Schönes Kind.'

'Bravo.'

The German officers were housed in two isolation houses and those of them fit enough came out to exercise in a little grass plot between two great hospital wings.

By standing on tiptoe in the main corridor one could spy on them. In their outlandish uniforms in grey and green dashed with silver, with Uhlan helmets, or rakish Little Willy hats with long peaks, they really looked of the same race as the Huns of cartoons.



## AFTER THE BATAILLE AND DISCONFITURE

They kept their silver epaulettes and braids shining, their marvelous leather boots glittering with polish and their spurs gleaming. With the dignity of pantheresses, delicate and dangerous, they paced unwearingly their cage. These men I could hate for I knew that if I caught the eye of one of them it would consume me with hate far greater than my own.

There was one, however, not as the rest. He was a U-boat Commander who was not right in the mind. He walked round not with the loose effeminate stride of a gallant, but with short running steps in a small circle, his head bent over the Bible.

'In German?' I asked, finding it hard to think of the Bible as anything but English.

He was no parade-ground soldier. His uniform was shabby and he wore a scarf round his neck, and he never never looked up at us. I used to wait breathlessly. On this turn he will look up, I would assert to myself. No man could possibly go on walking round without looking up sometimes. It had become imperative to see his face for this would tell me if he was mad and walked round in that small circle because he imagined himself in the cockpit of his submarine still.

*Look up*, I would silently command, but he never obeyed.

One day he slipped past the guard and made a dash for the hospital. The guard yelled but could not shoot into the ward where our men were lying, and chase was given. The elderly soldiers on whom the charge rested hunted the panic-stricken little man up the stairs through the startled wards, up until the last ward was reached and only the balcony remained, the small red balcony overlooking the cindered area. He climbed this and threw himself off.

Someone ran into the ward shouting 'The U-boat Commander's just jumped off the balcony.'

Quick as a flash I slipped out and ran towards the place of the suicide though what I hoped to see or to do, I did not know. As I turned the corner towards the balcony, an armed guard was still standing there looking down at the body, a heap of crumpled clothes at the foot of the fire-escape with men standing round it arguing, their faces hot with exertion and annoyance. In the midst of the group I saw—at last—the pale sad face of the U-boat Com-

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mander turned upwards, his piercing blue eyes still open and staring at the foreign sky with an expression of surprise and grief.

A guard ran towards me with a rifle. 'Git out uv 'ere, Scouty,' he said, with menaces. 'Git out before I give you a clout that'll knock you into Saturday week.'

Yet the war came to an end. In the autumn of 1918 the Germans were surging back across Flanders. 'Leppin' home like rabbits', my Auntie Florrie said. Broad loops and bulges added to our line in the newspapers day after day wrinkled like the thin tips of the waves running fast over flat sands. It was all very good and one was entitled to feel satisfied that for once they were moving in the right direction, but how could it be the end of what had become the whole of life? So, when one wet glistening November day a boy burst into the classroom to shout 'The Armistice! The Armistice!' we sat dumbfounded for a moment, then equating Armistice with Peace surged from our desks with yells and cries and clamoured up the stone stairs to the roof-playground where we exhausted ourselves with spontaneous and continuous cheering. Maroons crashed a basso profundo to our treble and from the Surrey Docks and the reaches of the Thames came the deep-throated thunder of all the great ships. Far away in the sky an aeroplane banked and rolled, turning and shining in the glad morning brightness. For an hour in November it was spring.

A day was set aside in the summer of 1919 to celebrate the signing of the peace treaty. The Scouts had arranged a tremendous parade in Hyde Park and our troop, band at its head, flags bravely flying, marched to join other contingents on their way to this celebration. I very proudly played the solo drum. In the Strand and Trafalgar Square everyone else was celebrating. A dizzy, shouting mass swallowed up the banners and bright uniforms of our column. The bands could not be heard; it was impossible to march for the pressure of the crowds against our ranks broke us into a straggling line which fought its way across the square. Ticklers were thrust into our faces, squeakers blown in our ears, streamers entangled us and confetti and rice were thrust down our necks and into our blouses and maudlin hands pinched our bottoms. Girls took our arms or clasped our necks as we marched



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and we could not shake them off, while tipsy members of His Majesty's Forces cheered us hilariously as we struggled—or tried to bang my drum.

'I don't think that was quite playing the game,' said my friend Roly as we emerged into the comparative quiet of Pall Mall.

In a dell in the park thousands of scouts were gathered and my heart swelled as though it would burst with pride. Speeches which we could not hear were made by heroes whom we could not see, yet everyone was so quiet when the Prince spoke that we heard a far-away sentence or two in a lonely frightened young voice about the new world we had to make. We cheered loyally and sang patriotic songs with all the might of our young throats and went chattering home again.

Everywhere the streets were decorated. Flags hung from windows and streamers—'God Save the King' or 'God Bless our Allies'—rode across the streets, with portraits of Haig and Foch, Lloyd George and Clemenceau and Wilson. As dusk came on a million coloured fairy lamps were lit, transfiguring mean streets with triumphal arches and slogans of fire and transforming slum alleys into fairy grottoes. People danced to gramophones in the streets. It was exhilarating to see. On Blythe Hill, near home, a bonfire larger than a two-storey house had been lit and we hurried there to shout and dance and skylark, and to stare into the crimson and purple funnel of flames. We picked out the sister fires of Blackheath and Telegraph Hill and beyond them a score of brilliant twinkling points under the ruddy clouds. We felt proud of the new era which had started with such excitement and glory. It was an augury of the future that not even the air raids of the war had made the sky as lurid as the bonfires of peace.

In the midst of all this public rejoicing another boy—Hilmar Voigt—and I lived the lives of hunted criminals. Voigt had discovered an explosive. Though one of its ingredients was saltpetre it was not gunpowder. We used to buy the constituents at chemists' shops in widely separated areas—and never more than one constituent from one shop—and mix up the powder in a tin and-tube' banger and it was most effective, but we longed for bigger effects. By placing a small heap under a stone and sharply

hammering the stone an effective explosion could be secured, though a dangerous one, for bits of the stone would blow off into your face and the flame was unpleasant. We needed a distant detonator and found that a tram was best. Heaps of the powder could be placed on tramlines at night and the fast-moving tram would detonate them so effectively as to throw all the passengers into a panic which we enjoyed watching from the hedges of a near-by garden. We played this game with trains, too, sneaking down on to the track and setting our heaps at distances along the line, so that the train set off a succession of fog-signals. It took the authorities some little time to wake to what was happening. One minor explosion while a tram was running along was certainly puzzling, both to passengers and driver, but it was hardly worth while holding the traffic up for. Once or twice we saw the driver stop and walk out to the rear to see what had dropped off and give it up as a bad job.

Our extraordinary immunity encouraged us in daring and we used the straight fast stretch for trams in Standon Park as a happy hunting ground, setting trails and successive heaps of the stuff until the drivers and the police grew wary and police began to ride on the trams and patrol the road, then when we were chased one night by police and inspectors into the grounds of the Noakes' estate by the Brockley Jack, where we hid for hours crouching in the grass like trembling hares in their forms, we thought the time had come to abandon our private war lest the next time we should happen to get captured—which was far from being part of our plan for the glorious peace.



## Chapter Seven

### WHERE THE TREE FALLETH

In the place where the tree falleth, there shall it be.—

ECCLESIASTES

**M**y new friend was Roly. His father and mother were on the stage and his brother Cedric who acted Tinker as a boy in Sherlock Holmes at His Majesty's, had been killed in the war. Roly was an actor inside too. He rode a bike as if it were a bronco of the American plains and he, its lord and master, a brave, hunting the thundering herds of buffalo. Standing on the pedals he drove it at you as if *you* were a buffalo and then pulled up apologetically within an inch of you, brakes screeching; or he rode around hallooing and trying to make his bike rear on its haunches like a circus beast. He beamed through thick spectacles, wreathing his face into as many wrinkles as a Chinese image and smiling always his tiny defensive smile so that you could not get at what was going on in his mind—and something was always churning mysteriously there. He possessed a violent demonstrative streak so that he'd get hold of you on the slightest provocation and give you a wrestle and a bear hug. Since he was older and stronger this had the effect on you the embrace of the python had on the sons of Laocoön. When limp and crushed you protested angrily he'd say apologetically, 'Oh, sorry, old man, sorry,' and go and do it to someone else. This rough clownish role, much resented by tender little boys, who called him 'crazy', was forced on him by some inner impulse to do anything to secure attention. He earnestly practised waggling his ears and shifting his scalp backwards and forwards and he would pull as many comic faces as the boy scout face modelled in gutta percha which I carried in my pocket to swank with.

Behind all this tomfoolery was a romantic boy with a subtle mind unhappy in the gross, greedy world and obsessed with exotic systems of ideas. After reading E. T. Seton he converted

me to Red Indianism and we took names—Big Beaver and Little Otter—by which we addressed each other exclusively in private, and learnt the Indian sign language. We walked the neighbourhood of the Ravensbourne on Saturdays making Indian camps in hidden places in woods, cooking our meals on Indian fires, taking leaves from trees to identify them by reference to a beautiful book by Ernest Step that we carried with us. We had our own repertoire of songs which included the 'Lincolnshire Poacher' and 'The Friar of Orders Grey' and a pathetic ballad of a Fenimore Cooper Indian (we read everything Fenimore Cooper wrote) who died in his native woods resisting the inroads of the white man, with this refrain:

*Where in his pride he roamed in his childhood,  
Fought he and died in the depths of the wildwood.*

When we sang that we were always sorry that we had not been born Indian too, that we might die as bravely.

Between us we formed an ambition to be writers and we collaborated in producing a coloured play called *Ethiopians in Elysium*, performed by our troop. Roly's first individual effort was an elaborate novel on the lines of *Montezuma's Daughter*, which never passed the planning stage, while mine was a short story called *David and Jonathan*, of two friends who loved each other so much that rather than quarrel over a girl they both loved, they committed suicide. Heartbroken, the girl decided that she could no longer live without them and died by her own hand too. The narrator of the story was the girl's father and he, poor old man, exhausted by tragedy, passed away in a club arm-chair, whisky and soda in hand, as the last words of this strange and marvellous history left his lips.

At sixteen Roly was a convert to Sufi'ism and we both bought the Koran in the English translation in order to find out what Mohammed had actually preached. At seventeen he was a theosophist and rosicrucian, dabbling in magic. At eighteen he was a convert to evolution and the recapitulation theory. When at twenty he added Freud, he planned an educational system which would give every child so much prior experience of adult life—even of war—that no-one need grow up self-conscious and miser-



ably inferior any more. With a handful of boys in Tooting, including one suffering from dementia praecox, he formed a movement to put his theory to the test. When last we met, Roly, indefatigably the same, was writing religious poetry, managing a theatre and casting horoscopes, and so fulfilling all boyhood ambitions simultaneously.

In our Red Indian days the lack of a bronco of my own was overcome by riding on the step of Roly's bike. One morning in the Whitefoot Lane which we had reached in this way, he told me that he had read a ripping joke.

'This chap Dr. Johnson,' he said, 'was once asked by some woman what was the difference between a man and a woman. "Madame," he said, "I cannot conceive!"'

I looked inquiringly at him.

"Madame," he said, "I cannot *conceive*," he repeated with much emphasis.

'Well?' I asked. 'What's funny about that?'

'Don't you understand it? Don't you know what it means?'

'I don't see anything funny about it,' I said guardedly.

'Oh, all right, wash it out.'

'Well, what's so funny?'

'Just wash it out.'

He looked nettled at the failure of his joke.

'You're too young.'

'I don't see what that's got to do with it.'

'You will when you're older.'

'Oh, rot.'

Now this baffling kind of conversation, which had something to do with boys and girls, men and women, was occurring too often for my peace of mind. Information was being kept from me, shameful information probably and I prodded to find out what it was.

David helped me to prod. David was Highland, straight and logical and aggressive, with rabbit front teeth and brown eyes under straight short hair which stood up like a tooth-brush on his smooth white brow, eyes which looked at you always in challenge. David went away when he grew up to be a Communist organizer on the Clydeside and then to fight in Spain. Now, aged

eleven, both of us, sitting round a fire on which our cocoa bubbled, with a green arbour of spring around us we worried Roly, who at fourteen was terrifically old.

'Tell us, Roly, what d'you think of girls?' I asked, with the memory of Roly's joke in my mind, I had too much pride to ask him outright what it meant. I was conscious of an interested stare from David. Roly did not want to discuss girls, for they were beginning to trouble his mind.

'I don't think,' he said sulkily.

'Straight though, Roly, what do you think?'

'Honest, not much,' he replied unwillingly, pushing a log with his boot and refusing to meet our eyes, 'they're a damn—sorry!—an awful nuisance.'

(Roly often swore, but apologized for swearing immediately afterwards, thereby gaining two reputations, one for daring and the other for moral rectitude.)

I settled back on my elbows in the green shade. It was what I privately thought.

'Then why do you chaps go after girls?' asked David. Roly rolled over and stared sharply at us, appalled by our innocence.

'Do you mean——?' He stopped and changed his tone as he looked at us. 'What's the good of asking me. I'm not an encyclopaedia.'

There was a pause and then he said with that sudden readiness to confide which was typical of him, 'Anyway, I hate 'em.'

'I don't think I hate them,' I said, turning the idea over in my mind and looking into the fire. David was watching him.

'He hasna got a girl, and he's mad,' he said slyly.

Roly ignored this. 'You don't want to worry, Les, about girls.'

'Och, nae, he's nae tae worry, bit why dae folks git marrit?'

'A daft question,' I said.

'My brither's got a lass, they get tae kissing in the front room.'

'Soft!' I said.

'And whit aboot babbies,' said David.

'Ask me another,' said Roly in bland refusal to talk.

I could tell by his eyes that he was holding something back.

'They come when folks are sick,' said David.

'How?' I asked.



'Dinna ken how,' said David lamely, ashamed and hanging his head. 'It's no verra nice.'

We thought it over, watching Roly and waiting for him to talk. But Roly pretended to be employed in making the fire burn. He blew up sparks and smoke which made our eyes sting.

'Strikes me, Dave, Roly's funking telling us. He's afraid of his Ma.'

'For why should he nae like us tae ask questions?'

'I'm going to find out, Roly,' I said.

His eyes were full of a pain which had no meaning for me.

'Chaps'll only make up filthy lies for you,' he said. 'Don't be an idiot, Les.'

'Feelthy lies, feelthy boys, feelthy boys, feelthy lies,' chanted David, jumping excitedly backwards and forwards over the fire, and thrusting his hands hard in his pockets. 'I know why he willna tell, it's dirty, he's frightit to tell.'

We rode home in the gathering dusk. The woods were full of ghostly stretches of mist rising up into the warm air, swallowing the bushes and the boles of trees and smoothing the meadows with pearls. The night dew beaded our hair. An owl screeched and the scything fearful bats harvested the air. It was almost night and in the lanes the boys and girls walked arm in arm or they lay half hidden in the bushes clasped together in close unmoving bundles, and sometimes laughed, and the unsolved question about them agitated me, making my heart beat quickly and filling me with a confusion that caused a pressure in my head.

As we turned the corner of the hill to look down towards the Ravensbourne we forgot the mysterious, frightening behaviour of couples in the hedgerows in the face of something extraordinary. An Army was in our woods. Grey lorries were parked in patterned rows, and camouflaged tents made sand-pie shapes in the clearings. The camp fires shone and hurricane lamps drew constellations over the ground. The hum and roar rose to us as from a fair. The woods were our playground.

'What the . . . ?' I asked as we stopped to gaze on the invasion.

'In our woods,' said Roly. 'Of all the nerve.'

'Ma pop says they're Canadians. Forestry Corps. Ye see they have tae gae where there are trees, tae practise.'

'I don't see why they have to practise on our trees,' I said. 'There's lots of forests in Canada they could practise on. Millions of them. Geography tells you that.'

'We've got a forest or two tae oursels,' said David. 'It's nae patriotic tae rin them down.'

'I don't see how cutting down our trees helps to win the war,' I said.

'Well, timber, of course, old boy,' said Roly deprecatingly.

'Timber!' I said. 'Our *wood*. They've taken all our playing fields as it is, to grow potatoes and you can't even buy them in the shops.' Both propositions were true though together they constituted a *non-sequitur*. I had queued the day before for two hours and got two pounds of potatoes, blue and runny. When boiled they were three-quarters black, and Mother mashed them up with bread and marge and a little milk to take off the nastiness. Even then we couldn't eat them.

'Tae tell the truth they're nae our woods. They dinna belang tae us.'

'Rot.'

'Dinna fash yersel,' said David crossly. 'Ma auld man says that all this land is going to be built on when the war is over, so our auld wood is nae important.'

'Rot!' I could not bear this kind of talk, so much on the side of grown-ups. 'Silly rot.'

'Ye'll see, ye big know-all. Ye blether a lot, but ye don't know everything.'

'Rot. You're just talking big yourself. Swanking.'

I could do nothing but abuse David because I was frightened. That people were going to be allowed to do what they liked—cut down our woods and build streets and houses all over our lanes and hills and meadows, was so elementarily wrong that there did not seem to be any argument about it. It was just wrong. I hated change. I hated new people. I did not want the things I liked destroyed. David's defence was terrible, it was going over to the enemy. He ought to have known that grown-ups had lots of fine-sounding reasons for taking things away from you.

'People have got to live somewhere,' said Roly, trying to effect peace. 'They've got to have houses.'



'Well let them go and live somewhere else,' I said. 'There's plenty of houses.'

'Oh, pit a sock in it,' said David. 'Ye silly lummock.'

And we got on the bikes angrily and rode home shouting out insults to each other. And I was angry for days after, though no-one would listen to me, because they never went to the woods—what was a wood? It was only, as David said scornfully, a few bit trees growing out of the grass—and the peace was such a long way off they weren't bothered about what was going to happen when it came.

David and I did not speak for a week, but then our wrath subsided and it became impossible to do anything but make friends again. School life demanded a certain ritual of reconciliation. After hanging about miserably and nervously in the playground pretending not to see each other, I made the required overture.

'Shake, David?' I asked.

'Shake, Les,' he said, ashamed not to have been first. We shook hands solemnly. Dave took out a ball and we ran dribbling it to the tram, deliriously happy to be friends again.

'Mind ye,' said Dave, after a while, 'I'm no recanting man. Me feyther says ye must no gang against yer opinions to please ither folk.'

'And there's niver a man in the village,' I hummed as my father used to do when one of us tried to seek a quarrel, 'dares thread on the tail of my coat.'

A half-sweet terror was added to my life, for other gossip followed David's, confirming the rumour. The land was to be built upon, and once war stopped I walked into that country, now as fabulous as Camelot, with my breath held and my pulse quickening. Dear heaven, it was still there, more precious in its serene unconsciousness of doom than ever before. The hawthorns foamed like breakers against the wood that housed the gipsies. The meadowsweet grew rank by the side of the cornfields where the corncrakes and the partridges ran. Jasmine and honeysuckle scented the hollow at the stile which led to the Seven Fields where the swallows flew and there still, welling clear and cold and mysteriously from a small bank which you could never find unless you knew where to look, was the beginning of a river. You could







kneel down and put your face in the crystal and feel against the cheek the strange unceasing pressure from the regions under the earth where no man had ever been. Yet stare as you would you could not see how the water entered that green cup which the wild peppermint made more fragrant.

No, not yet gone. Here, here, here as I walked or ran alone, I would think, still here, making a kind of song of it, and touching the trees, the bare fallen one which our knees and hands and bottoms had polished, the pines, the totem tree of Roly and me, the willows of the secret bends and pools of the Ravensbourne woods.

And when indeed the building began, to great local excitement, and people trooped out in hundreds on Sundays to see it, with what indescribable sorrow I saw the loved places fall and cease altogether to be, and I too die in that measure with them, as the mean unwanted squads and battalions of houses marched in.

If the men who were going to build were here, I said to myself, I would take a long lion-tamer's whip and crack it terribly once each side of them to make them bunch fearfully, as the lion-tamers always did. And if they hesitated then I would cut their legs or their fingers with it, to prove that I was in earnest, only carefully, for you could take a man's finger off with it quite easily, or flick his eye out.

They would know by my bearing that I was driving them off my land as Christ drove the money-changers out of the temple. Of course they would be angry and one of them would advance on me saying, 'You can't hurt us, I see you are only a boy, or at least a very young man for your bearing is old for your years.' And I would say, 'Though I am young and my beard is not yet grown, I am a match for you,' and I would throw him the whip scornfully but before he could use it, draw my six-shooters and with one well-aimed shot from my left hand, knock the cigarette from his teeth and with one from my right hand, drill a hole in his hat.

'Get,' I would say, 'or I'll drill you as full of holes as a colander. For I have ten shots left which is enough for all of you.'

And they would run away as they do in the films, tumbling over each other comically and falling in the mud and I would put one casual shot after them to make them run faster, then toss my six-

shooters up in the air and catch them again nonchalantly and put them in the holsters.

'If they come here again,' I would say to my faithful man, Carruthers, who all this time had been holding my pinto's head, 'I will flay the living hide off them with my elephant whip.' I could see the whip going thud, thud, thud on their bodies. And I set my jaw grimly as I walked away.

'Gittee up for the boss,' said Carruthers to the pinto, so that I could mount easily. 'You're the goldarnest limb I ever set eyes upon.'

That, from Carruthers, was praise indeed.

The dream of the Undiscovered Country, already two years old, now grew in clarity and power. At first it had, like the prophetic dream about the date of Jack's going away, the character of something that had happened to my waking self. So persistent was the memory of it, so overwhelming the emotion it engendered that it was absurd to assume that something so infinitely rich and warming had *not* happened to me.

In the dream I am at the doorway. Then I walk down the familiar street and I turn left then right again up the hill, then left, then right again over the brow. The journey is wedded most firmly to the already familiar topography. Then I am all at once in the country. There is a birch wood half-hidden by a hedge, a rutted path sunk below primrose banks which leads to a single plank bridge across a stream flashing in the sunlight over pebbles. And beyond, a meadow, wearing the green of a wet country, yellow with cowslips and buttercups, rising gently to a crest of trees. I am small and the grass reaches my knees. As I cross the bridge to wade in the grass, an exaltation grows on me: I am hugging to myself the holy thought, I am here, I have come to the place. Banished to an untroubling remoteness is whatever menace I had to break from in order to reach it. There is no distortion, no sense of moving without the body, it is all as in life itself with the same happiness that belonged to peering over a gate at a dewy private garden with thrushes on the lawn, or coming suddenly upon a cool sleeping corner of the park that one had never seen before. I see with unearthly brightness for my eyes are whole. No



squint, no glasses, and no double vision oppress me, and so no need to take the tram to Saint George's Circus and queue up behind the grill, waiting for the eye hospital to open, or to suffer drops in my eyes and know the relentless bony fingers of the optician turn my head sharply up to the painful light and push the lids away from my fluttering eyes upon which his breath dribbled moisture. A wizened old man with snuff on his black waistcoat, he always had one answer if I complained that the wire frame of my spectacles cut my nose and ears and made sores on them. He would wrench his off and exhibit angrily their blackened twisted frames and say 'The poor can't be choosers! I wear 'em, don't I? They don't trouble me.' It was easy to see why, for his whole hairless head was as smooth and hard as ivory. But my black wire frames were often crusted with blood or the scabs of sores when I pulled them off—they cut so deeply and so painfully.

I made my resolute efforts to find this country, spending Saturday mornings searching for it, remembering the dream route and yet coming with a desolate heart only to houses. Never as a child did I admit that it was only a dream; it could not be. All that had happened was I had forgotten the way. So I would try again, varying my road, yet always with the same result. As the years passed the dream persisted and waxed in strength; and sleep created countrysides with the passion that belongs to the creation of beautiful women, only without any doubt any longer as to what was fantasy and what the solid day.

One result of my boyhood dream was to make me speculate as to whether the undiscovered country had once existed and had been built upon, and that I was simply seeing into the past with a clairvoyance of which Auntie Florrie would have approved. Scraps of local history about 'long, lazy, lousy Lewisham', the Ford at Catford, the palace at Eltham, wild boar hunts in the forest of Forest Hill, the Brockley vineyards of the monks, the semaphore tower of the Napoleonic Wars on Telegraph Hill, all made me look at the place I lived in with new eyes. The speculative builder looks at the green land and his heart is warmed by the thought of the houses and roads he can create, and the money they will bring; anti-socially, I did the opposite, and reclothed the earth with its woods, meadows and vineyards, its tracks, hamlets and monas-

teries, and swept away all else. I stared at prints and pictures in books and mourned the progress that had taken so much away which could never be put back.

Yet even David was shaken when it was rumoured that they were going to build on the Noakes Estate opposite the Brockley Jack, made glorious by its green meadows—where Daddy had an allotment in the war—and sweeping lines of chestnuts whose delicate ladies' gloves of green were the first royal warrant of spring. We had often trespassed there and lain in the grass of the meadows under the honey-dripping limes.

'Well, I'll say this, mon, it ought tae be a park. Me feyther says it ought tae be a lung. Not the ordinary kind of lung, ye ken.'

'Maybe, the scouts could have it,' said Roly, 'and cut their own trees to make wigwams.'

Gilwell Park had just been opened and we were full of the dream of a Gilwell of camp fires, tents, and totems for our own troop.

'And perhaps the old ladies could give it to the school when they die.'

'That's a fat lot of good,' said David.

'An open-air school,' I said, looking at the regal chestnuts. 'And to have for sports.'

'A park, mon, a park, for every yinn tae hae pleasure in.'

I did not want everyone to take pleasure in it. It would be quite enough for it to belong to just a few of us—Roly, David, Billy, Dickie Weeks, and me. A park belonged to nobody except keepers. You could not do what you liked.

Of course it was built on—and Bellingham, Grove Park, Bromley, Hayes, West Wickham, Knockholt, Farnborough, Westerham, Elmstead, Chislehurst, Orpington, Petts Wood, Blenden Hall, where the herons nested. Where not? and where these broad acres were inundated, how could so small an island escape?



## Chapter Eight

### WITH MUCH ADO

So that with much ado I was corrupted, and made to learn the dirty devices of this world.—TRAHERNE

**S**uch brittle innocence could not endure. It belonged too much to immaturity and we sought ourselves to destroy it for not to know was insupportable and we could not judge what knowing meant. If our minds were innocent our blood was not. It drove us to knowledge. It knew secretly what excitement dwelt in the taste of that fruit and it would not be denied no matter what the price exacted.

Many of my companions believed me pious. When I sneaked up fearfully to the fringes of the excited, whispering coteries at the back of the classroom in break-time they would push me away, misliking my agonized hunting, or perhaps having pity on me.

‘Clear off, Pauly, this ain’t for you.’

‘He’s green.’

‘Buzz off or we’ll smack your head.’

‘Pi, you mean.’

They might easily beat me until I did go humiliated away. Nevertheless one learnt all that was to be learnt in the end. Hanging about on the outskirts of groups, picking up a word here or there, puzzling over a pointless joke until its point became only too clear, reading the copies of *La Vie Parisienne* which found their way into the classroom from soldiers overseas, intercepting notes about Bible passages, the evil could not be kept away from me, nor ever can in the end from the young who are to grow.

One day I walked unexpectedly into a hospital ward and there was a scuffle, and I saw. The soldiers stared angrily at me, hostile to my extreme youth.

‘Look out,’ one of the soldiers said, ‘’Ere’s Scouty.’

‘It don’t matter about him. He ain’t green, are you, Scouty?’

'Poor little b——r, I knew everything there was to be known at his age.'

'I'm not green,' I said, still and scornful, and walked out of the ward carefully, holding my body together in white and angry pride. No-one should see what I felt and thought. I stole home in the cooling air of the rainswept park—the rain was silver, dropping in veils about the poplars, in sharp clean arrows on the sandy path before me, and hissing on the river and flawing its surface—to let the panic and fever subside (or my face would tell too much) knowing with the certainty that belongs to life and death and conversion that I could not be a child any more and must reckon not merely with the new external enemy but with an inward one. Though I stayed in bed next morning and played with toy soldiers in the hills and valleys of the counterpane, creating ravines into which the lead enemy should fall, this was self-deception. The evil was not to be exorcised in this way. It had come to stay and one would have to face it in one's loneliness throughout life. The evil? Presently we were going to argue about that, Roly and I. Whatever the force that now compelled us, exercising over our bodies and imaginations a tyranny so absolute that anything that did not belong to it was merely of a secondary or illusory order of reality, at thirteen one knew that so monstrous an obsession was evil.

Presently we intellectualized the struggle and talking out of books rather than experience said that an instinct by which the species was maintained could not be anything but good, really, and all that was wrong was our civilization which wrapped it up in humbug, lies, and hypocrisy. We complained to each other that we should have been taught, not isolated from knowledge and experience. What was wrong with our analysis was that we still felt guilty even though we knew, or thought we knew all about it now.

For Roly, despite all our intellectualizations of sex, was still to come to me one day to tell me that he had decided to do away with himself. He could not stand any more. To my startled why, he replied quietly that he could not bear the thought of his mother finding out—as she was bound to do from the state of the sheets in the morning. It was something, he said, he could not control any more, a disease of his sleep.



In the heat and splendour of June, a few weeks after the incident in the hospital, Mother fell ill. I was roused out of my new bemusement one morning to take a note to the doctor. Once in the morning air my somnambulism enveloped me like a cloak and I dawdled on my errand—there had been many such, and why should this one be more urgent than the last? But the new doctor was a mile away and I took too long to get there. When I returned it was to a shattered home. Mrs. Brown was wringing her hands on the doorstep.

‘Oh, why have you been so long, you lazy boy?’ she said. ‘Couldn’t you have hurried when your mother is ill?’

My nerves jumped as disaster swooped at me. I could read terror in the frightened faces of the adults, in the utter disintegration which seemed to have come upon Kenneth and Marjorie: guilt began to devour me before another word was said and I slunk into the house like a dog into its kennel. ‘The nurse has come,’ Kenneth said, so white and unmoving he was beyond crying. ‘We’ve wired to get leave for Daddy.’

Still nobody told me what it was and fright choked me so that I could not move my lips to ask. From the front bedroom came the animal groans and cries of one in exhaustion, as a man might cry out unaware as he fought with another for his life, revealing all his pain and despair. Mother is dying, I thought, overwhelmed with grief, and all because I did not hurry. The black terror she is wrestling with upstairs alone—it seemed to me that she must be alone or they would not let her cry out in such anguish—the doctor could have killed had I hurried with the note. I walked out into the garden with my grief, unable to bear any company or to listen helplessly to my mother’s pain. If Mother dies, I said to God, I will kill myself.

The June sun poured down, a radiant jubilant flood, its heat and beauty an offence. The stones of the backyard threw up the heat and dazzle: its brightness made the rows of potato plants and the tall ash-tree sombre. The sky was flawless, as pure and as holy as the heaven of the serene imagination, and no word came of it of the love or consolation I needed, only the indifferent fire shining down here just as it shone down on my fields and woods, just as it shone down on the dead in Flanders fields. The cries were un-

heeded, they tore at my heart but not at the sky, and I sat down (I could not trust myself to stand) on the concrete under the rose arbour, rocking myself gently in my grief and beating my head on the lavatory door when I could bear Mother's cries no longer. When she ceased for a spell the torment went on in my head by itself, and I trembled uncontrollably lest it might never start again.

In the house it was worse. There was no-one to whom one could speak, to whom one could say one was sorry, who would not answer with a scornful glance, and the cries which God would not hear were so loud now I was afraid I should break down altogether into shameful public tears.

My brother was staring at the empty grate. 'It's a baby,' he said bitterly. A baby! This second blow beat into my head with such a stunning force that I thought I was going to faint, and at that moment I heard my father's voice at the front gate. I was too ill and confused to go to meet him. Had I done so I might have blurted out something scalding to him. Trembling with shame I went back to the garden and lay in a trance of prayer, pressing my cheek on the stones under the roses and entreating God not to let Mother die but to kill me in her stead, and not to punish Father for what he had done.

And now, mingled with Mother's groans, what before had escaped my notice, the thin reedy squalling of the infant launched so violently on the bloody world. The infant who was the end of it all, the trivial, helpless, and somehow ironical consequence of so much pain, indignity, and desire.

Mother recovered and the baby lived. But the nurse was a starched autocrat, who bullied us, and we were not allowed into the sick-room, which made us fear some terrible change in Mother, as though after all that pain she could not possibly be the same. And when I did visit her, bearing a hydrangea in a pot as a present, it was to meet from her lovely white face on the pillow the reproach, 'Why have none of you been to see me?' and I started to cry for the first time.

With Mother's recovery my somnambulism returned in a world which appeared now to be wholly geared to sex. How was it that I had never noticed before what the adult world was so much con-



cerned with? The posters of stage shows, the pictures in the papers, the advertisements, the stories in the *News of the World*, the nudes in the art shop I had so often peeped at, the statues in the Crystal Palace seemed altogether to glorify that which so disturbed me and morals condemned. I began to suspect that hypocrisy veiled the principal grown-up interest from the inconvenient eyes and tongues of children. *Look out, 'ere's Scabby*. How was it that I had never perceived the biological purposes so unspeakably advertised in the bosoms and hips of the women I passed in the street, even in the women teachers I was unhappily compelled to gaze at in school? When possible I lowered my eyes or bowed my head before them and if a pregnant woman was getting on the tram I would hold shamefacedly back and catch the next one for I had once heard a story of a baby being born on a tram. I was estranged from the girls in my class, even the little Mannin girl with whom I had been in love, and actually got as far as going to tea with, and the red-headed tomboy I had kissed delightedly in front of the whole school in a play and wanted to kiss in the dark. Girls had become *sex*. I was speechless and sweated in my palms when I was alone with them and the thought of kissing them made me burn with shame. I noticed that the red-headed girl had wet hands and beads of moisture in the roots of her red hair and in a band across her forehead when she was alone with me, and was additionally repulsed.

Once I had run about and shouted in blithe indifference to the world. My Uncle Jim had complained indeed that I never stopped still for two minutes at a time. Now I walked softly about in a day-dream from which I woke to outer reality, when I had to, with a guilty start; the somnambulism was stupefaction with what was taking place inside my head. This inner drama was the supreme reality and I had spasms of acute and alarming doubt about the existence or solidity of any outer reality at all.

This was accompanied by a psychic disorder which would come upon me unexpectedly. The sufferer from vertigo feels that he is about to fall from a height and the sensation is so intense that he longs to surrender to it and cast himself down. I could not look up at tall buildings without the sensation that they were about to crumple up in an avalanche of separate stones. The moment I walk

under them they will fall upon me, I thought, and would cross to the other side of the road to circumvent them. Under a bridge I would suffer from the anticipation of its imminent collapse. Even among the more friendly trees I experienced this. Riding in a tram which was approaching a sharp curve it was nonsense, I conceived, to expect the tram to go round it. It was just as likely to take the much more easy path of going straight on. I would shut my eyes, feel in my bones the tram surge straight on to disaster then open my eyes to find that the tram had simply and safely taken the curve. It was more than a kind of animism. I cannot recollect endowing tall buildings and bridges, trams and trees with any kind of malevolency. It was a metaphysical doubt. We place the stones in these perilously tall piles and we expect them to stay there, something in me argued, but it is only our expectation that they will that keeps them there. I saw no reason why church spires should not slide down into comfortable piles of bricks or the tensions of the bridge slacken from fatigue and give way in one rush. It was unreasonable to expect that this would happen just at the moment that I arrived there. But then they took no special account of me and were just as likely to do it when I—who recognized their fatigue, their exemption if they chose from the laws they were being compelled to obey—was present. I took no chances and stayed in dangerous places for as short a time as possible and anyone watching me walk home from school would have witnessed a curious zigzag in my tracks along the main road as I passed from one side to another or made a detour through the side streets to avoid the menace of a particularly tall steeple.

To the spiritual confusion was added the loss of the self-sufficiency and integrity of childhood, that 'slightly awkward perfected' of which Auden speaks, revealed in the uneven and unexpected physical development and in the terrible new demands. I did not know what to do about them, for they possessed me like a biblical devil and drove me mad. Prayer was the resource for which my whole upbringing had prepared me and alone with God in church, or listening to him at Communion, or even while walking the streets I prayed until I was exhausted.

Prayer became not the formal recital of Anglican collects (though it contained them) but something which did not depend



on words, which could be wordless, a willing of the spirit to reach something, a spiritual athleticism, an effort to leap out of the prison of my desires and passions and the gross cinematographic pictures of my imagination into some contact with God that would give me peace and wisdom. I prayed to live my life out in the open, with nothing to hide, freed from the shabby physical tyranny which had overtaken it. I did not disdain to cry 'Oh God, help me, help me!' but it was sufficient to say nothing at all so long as I willed the effort of prayer. I took to walking about at night in the dark, and in the wind and rain to climb up the Honor Oak hill and walk off my unhappiness among its woods, then to lean against a tree and feel its rough bark under my fingers and with the wet night wind in my face look down on to the constellations and archipelagos of lighted London.

Then, my whole self exalted with prayer, God became the absolute omnipresent reality, bearing up the earth, beating down the rain, letting loose the scent of wet, decaying leaves, pressing into the air the fountain of cells which spurted above me in a mysterious, half-seen arbour, and who had made to bear itself upright the column of arteries and atoms of which I was made.

It was this exercise, in part athletic, which kept me from trying to take the road out which Roly had contemplated and which in moments of depression seemed the only possible release.

As Roly and I grew up we were mutually horrified to think that every other boy following us must go through the same misery on his way to manhood. About so grim an ordeal something should surely be done, and, not lacking reformatory enthusiasm and learning a little of the half-sexual tribal initiations of youth, we were ready to welcome the theories of the Kibbo Kift Kindred, a fraternity of cowled and jerkined camping folk which hoped to overturn the industrial west by a mixture of open-air life, international currency, and handicraft. Kibbo Kift, which at one time had something of the importance in this country of the Wander-Voegel in Germany, proposed among other things (in the manner of an Eastern cult and probably because it had been much influenced by the fashionable theosophy of the day) that every disciple

should have his *chela* whom he must initiate into the way of life of the brotherhood by instruction and example.

Though more in need of instruction than able to teach we proudly sought out chelas and after many a long argument over bad cups of coffee in the steaming and smoking fish-and-chip cafés of New Cross and Peckham, decided that one duty to them had to take precedence over any other, and that was elementary instruction in sex. My own chela came from Deptford and sang in a choir and was shell-pink and rosy and candidly blue-eyed. He wore a shabby, much darned green tweed suit which he had so outgrown that acres of scrubbed wrist and knee were bare. His self-possession was formidable.

So I said my say poorly and in embarrassment and the chela sat quietly through it, giving me sidelong glances, astounded that anyone should speak of such things. A lame silence followed my concluding moral homilies. My own ordeal demanded some greater return than silence, however respectful, I thought, and was aggrieved. Some expression of gratitude or acknowledgment of a burden eased at least was due to me. But no, my chela was furtively silent, studying his swinging shoes and coughing a little from the furious cigarette smoke which I had thrown up as a smoke screen between us.

Did he know it all then, I inquired, and was that why he was silent?

Yes, he did, he replied. He did. He nodded. Since he was ten.

And then, after another silence, and to some vigorous cigarette puffs, I wondered whether, perhaps, there was not something—*anything*—he would like to ask. I was his friend, he could ask me anything.

He studied the fire, and the pottery incense burner and the pine branch I had hung over the mantelpiece and then his own knees and said yes, there was something, if I was sure I did not mind.

Go on, I said, go on. Of course I don't mind.

Then perhaps I could tell him when his voice would break?

Why specially that, I wanted to know?

Because he would have to leave the choir and he'd like to get some other job like delivering papers if he did, so that he would not have to lose any money. He'd soon be a senior boy and get



seven-and-sixpence a quarter and it did not seem fair to get up to that only to lose it. He was deeply perturbed about this, and often returned to the subject in the weeks that followed, complaining bitterly of a natural event which could not be delayed or by-passed and which (unfairly) his sister did not have to endure, and yet which was going to deprive him of his pocket money.

And then when he had to go, happy that the ordeal was over he stood up eagerly and bent smiling and deferentially towards me and said there *was* something else important he wanted to ask me and he hoped I would not mind and he pulled a grubby packet from his pocket. They were going to do *The Messiah* and would I buy a ticket and come to hear him sing? He was awfully anxious that I should. He had been waiting to ask me all the evening.

The half-crown I gave him for my ticket was all that I had left to last me the rest of the week. Swinging the half-crown in his fist he sang 'Gloria in Excelsis Deo' as he skipped down the street.

Roly interviewed his chela in the drawing-room where we sang Victorian ballads together on Sunday night and the little boy sat on the kind of horse-hair chair that pricked one's bare knees, amid the vases of pampas grass and the china presents from the seaside which climbed above the mantelpiece in a squirrel-run of tiny platforms and posts and pillars of polished mahogany. I wondered afterwards how he got rid of his Granny, who partially deaf and almost completely blind used to wander in and out of that room continually and disorganize by her very presence any serious conversation. If you said to her that you wanted to be private that was the surest way to induce her to shuffle around after you and gossip.

Roly's chela was a neurotic child at the best of times and far from phlegmatic. Under Roly's owlish instruction he became hysterical and would not let him finish.

He pulled ornamental plates off the sideboard and hurled them at Roly. 'It's not true, it's not true,' he shouted. 'You're just lying.' He dashed the chair he was sitting on to the floor and kicked at it in his rage.

'Liar! Liar!' he shouted. 'My mother would never do a thing like that.'

Roly, alarmed at the whirlwind he was reaping, approached him

with the gentleness that was instinctive to him in the presence of the unenlightened.

'But ...' said Roly. 'Have *sense*.'

'Don't you come near me,' shouted the boy, now beside himself with anger and grief, 'or I'll stick this knife into you!' And he drew from his stocking the skene dhu which had been Roly's present to him.

He pushed the table between Roly and himself and ran out of the room, shouting insults. And whenever afterwards he met Roly in the street he crossed scowling to the other side as if Roly were a monster whose presence contaminated the air.

When Roly got over the shock to his self-esteem produced by this behaviour he came to me, smiling his defensive smile, and said, 'You know, he's *just* the sort of boy who really *needs* that teaching. You'd think he'd have been grateful, even if only a little bit. I just can't understand it.'

He waved his palms like an indignant Frenchman, but averted his eye.

A week or so later Roly returned to the theme of chelas.

We were sitting in the cold lemon winter sun listening to the storming rooks of the vicarage elms at West Wickham. Across the shallow valley among still fields not yet built over, stood the graceful country church I was trying to sketch. Sketching was a new passion. Every man should try to be an artist, I was arguing.

'I don't think I'll have a *boy* chela again,' Roly said.

'You can't have a *girl* chela.'

I laughed, thinking of Roly, so proud of his huskiness, tramping about the countryside holding a little girl's hand.

He looked dubiously at me and took his gleaming spectacles off to polish them. Without them his eyes had no colour and he looked older and sadder.

'No,' he said, and put his spectacles on again. 'No.'

'But then ...' he went on. 'After all. And I do flatter myself I know more than *most* people of my age. And a girl about my *own* age. Or just a bit younger. After all.'

He brightened and looked hopefully at me. He wanted me to approve and went on eagerly, as if I had been arguing against it.



WITH MUCH ADO

'You know me. I'm not the sort of chap to go about spooning. You know that, Les, don't you.'

Indeed I knew. 'After all, to help to educate a girl of my own age. To talk about the real things of life. You know. Everything that's really important. Not a girl who uses make-up, but an open-air girl. Don't you think, Les?'

Yes, I had thought. Often.

'There's Lily,' I said slyly.

Lily was a girl we both knew in Kibbo Kift.

'Ugh?' he said. 'Lily!'

He got up without another word and kicked moodily about the frosty grass, his hands in his pockets and eyes on the ground, as if he had lost something.

'At least he might have given me back the skene dhu,' he snapped angrily over his shoulder.

## Chapter Nine

### CLARET IS THE LIQUOR FOR BOYS

Claret is the liquor for boys; port for men; but he who aspires to be a hero must drink brandy.—DR. JOHNSON.

M<sup>a</sup>dame Vernet's liquid brown eyes looked at you from a face as sad and as wizened as a monkey's, and surmounted by a ginger wig whose appalling curls hung in a stiff fringe across that so mobile brow.

'Avez-vous vu le parc de Green-witch?' she chanted at us from the book she had written herself and which is still somewhere on my shelves.

'Répondez, mes enfants, "Oui, madame, je l'ai vu!"'

'Wee, madum, shelay voo.'

'Ah, ts—ts—"Non madame, je ne l'ai pas vu".'

'Nonn, madum, shene lay voo pas.'

'Ah, ts—ts—mon Dieu! quel accent!'

'Bien, écrivez maintenant.' And we made pretence to écrire. She was little and dowdy and old and a foreigner and we did not give a hoot for her. French was just a lark and we knew by instinct that she was too weak to keep order, so we did prep for other teachers under her nose, or folded paper aeroplanes and launched them over her head, or drew circles on our locker tops with the broken ends of pens.

As we grew more confident we organized our riots more thoroughly, crawling under the desks after books we knocked down and staying there to play noughts and crosses, or swarming out in twos or threes to ask permission to leave the room, or pestering her with music-hall questions about the French passion for snails and frogs.

Madame was deceived by all this. She imagined in her simplicity that if you asked a question it was because you wanted an answer, or if you sought permission to leave the room it was because nature meant you to. She believed in the human child, in



its decency and kindness, and told us as much. This was more painful to us than belief in our duplicity would have been. We did not want to conform to any foreigner's conception of what the human child should be.

Therefore we revenged upon Madame all the slights we suffered at the hands of other teachers and, as discipline decayed further, her classes became a bedlam which must have been unendurable to her. It was not that she would never fly into a rage—indeed it was our aim to provoke her into one, *but we guessed at some spiritual* impotence in her and knew that her rages were no more dangerous to us than those of a dog chained to a wall. And yet she was so kind that she would pardon the most outrageous behaviour, even personal insults—and these were many and related to wigs and the Darwinian theory—if one gave one's word not to repeat the outrage, a promise no-one made with the intention of keeping. She ran a League of Kindness (Ligue de Bonté) which had a large membership in France and a not inconsiderable membership in our school, though most of us joined it at first in innocence or because we believed (without any evidence) that members of the League received better marks than non-members.

Kenneth, who preceded me by a year through the school, was an enthusiastic member of this Movement and enjoyed the respect and confidence of Madame, who compared us unfavourably. He was the school secretary for a time and corresponded with a French boy, which was one of the purposes of the League. He was the soul of chivalry and was kind to Madame, and supported her, because his sense of fair play was outraged by the treatment she received. And because he liked French.

One morning at break after a most riotous and villainous French lesson, in which we hunted a white-faced Madame as ruthlessly as a terrier runs down a terrified rabbit, I had occasion to return to the classroom for some books. Madame was in tears. She was sitting huddled over her desk, her wig pushed askew by the hand that had wiped the tears from her eyes, the picture of misery, as though just in that moment she saw the enormity of her failure with us and where it must lead. I was eleven and my tender heart turned and sank within me. Teachers had been legitimate game and one had never thought of our riots in terms

of their unhappiness. I stood, books in hand, transfixed with pity.

'Madame,' I said greatly daring, 'I—we didn't *mean* anything—not really—please, Madame, it was only fun.'

She looked up at me, not hiding her tears, not ashamed to cry before me. She was unhappy! She would be unhappy. With a tap she restored her wig and her dignity. She smiled damply at me, a wrinkled old woman, mysterious with age. 'You are as kind as your brother, Leslee, but no, I am not deceived. They only mean it in fun, then they are sorree, then they forget. And next time it is the same. The English boy, he is barbarian, he understands only the stick.'

'Oh, *Madame*,' I said, wooing her with a crestfallen look. Her smile was proud and firm and made her face beautiful. It rejected my cheap consolations. It rejected my country.

'You are very kind, Leslee, thank you.'

'Honestly, we don't *mean* it, Madame.'

'You don't mean it, no. But because I do not give you the stick, you do it. I am not English, I do not understand the logic: it is not French logic.'

The deserved scorn for my country hurt me most: the more as I knew quite clearly not only that we were bad but that Madame never would control a class.

'*Honestly*, Madame,' I said, pleading to be believed because there was no other way of being kind.

'Please go, Leslee,' she said and I went still smiling insincerely to chase her unhappiness away. But even as I went she forgot me and turned to the window, tears starting in her eyes again.

And though after that nothing would induce me to rag Madame, and her friendliness made me happy, my influence counted for nothing. She did not control us. We grew worse and worse: we learnt no French. After a term or two she went to whatever bourn is reserved for elderly French spinsters with little money, who have spent a lifetime in teaching.

We called him Smut, his real name was Smith. Wild tufts of hair shot off his mostly bald head in eccentric directions. His ginger moustache was frayed through constant gnawing: it was his habit



to thrust one end into his mouth and chew it impatiently while you 'construed' your shorthand to him. His eyebrows bristled and his voice rasped in an unpleasant, bullying cockney. His haggard, twitching face gave the whole man away. He was all ends and pieces like his shorthand, into the teaching of which he put a neurotic energy out of all proportion to the importance of the subject—though for him the whole *point* of going to a Central School with a commercial bias was to learn shorthand and type-writing. He'd grant you book-keeping, maths., and commercial French as useful sidelines, but the girls—why, they were not going out into the world to rule kingdoms, run businesses, or write poems (they were not even going to read them) they were going to type and take down letters in shorthand. The boys through knowledge of shorthand were, if lucky, going into banks, if not, into offices. They might rise to be secretaries of companies, or reporters on newspapers, or anyhow chief clerks.

So I sat under him learning to be a clerk or maybe a secretary of a company and tried to understand the meaning of the curved and straight lines, the upright and falling lines, the little footballs in the air and the dots and darts flying in unlikely places. I learnt and forgot again almost immediately and was never tidy enough to be able to transcribe my own work afterwards. My straight lines got themselves curved, my uprights fell over and no man could tell which was thick and which was thin and I could not be bothered.

Smut would pull at his hair and complain exasperatedly, 'I dunno what you'll do when you leave school, Pauly. I dunno oo'll 'ave yer.' It was a matter that worried me too. We talked a lot about the jobs we were going to get, but I was not going to let Smut know that I was troubled.

He had a technique of his own to drill us in halving. The first lesson startled us.

'Now, yer've got ter learn to say *Bang*. Now see what happens. "Pack"—so!' He made his stroke on the blackboard with the energy of a man swinging a sabre. 'Now—sing! Whaddo I do, Pauly?'

'Halve it, sir.'

'Right, watch. *Bang!*' He wet his forefinger and smudged half the stroke away. 'See? *Bang!* it's GONE!'

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We watched uncomprehendingly.

'Now, talk. Talked. Watch—"T"'—he drew it—"K"'—he drew it—'make it TALKED—what?—Bang!' Off went his finger on its amputating errand again.

'Now, SMOKE. SMOKED. S—M—K—Bang! Say it with me. S—M—K—Bang!'

'S—M—K—Bang!' we whispered half-heartedly, contemptuous of the fooling.

'Come on. Loud. As if you meant it. S—M—K—Bang!'

'S—M—K—Bang!' we shrieked, joining in the idiocy to please him.

'Now, Pauly—CANE, CANING. Come on! What is it?'

'K—N—er—Bang, sir. KANING,' I said dubiously, knowing that it was not without significance that my name was coupled with the cane.

'Well, off yer go and get it,' he would say. 'Fer not pying attention.'

The class would go deadly still and watchful. Was he in earnest? He was a furious caner. With a white obstinate face I would go to the door feeling the pressure of his rage grow behind me by my very movement. My reluctant hand on the knob released the pressure.

'Well, will yer pie attention and learn, or will yer not?' He would bellow in a nervous fury, nearly pulling his moustache off. 'Go and sit down, you worthless donkey.'

The storm had passed, but there was one more enmity to chalk up against him. Our dislike of each other came to a head in the playground one day. It was the custom for the Duty Master to blow his whistle for the signal to stand still, then blow it again for permission to troop into the classrooms. Naturally enough the second whistle was often ignored. We paused politely after the first signal, then began to trickle slowly into the school.

Smith was not going to have this. He blew his whistle one day and shouted 'Stop movin'!' We stopped. 'Nah, this first whistle means yer stop. And if yer stop, yer stop. Nah go on playing.'

We played perfunctorily, inhibited by the very order. He blew his whistle. We stopped. 'What did I tell yer? To stop, didn't I?



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S—T—O—P spells STOP to me whatever it does to some of yer. Anyone'd think you were just out of baby's napkins.'

We tee-heed sycophantically to appease him. 'Lots of yer moved. You moved, Pauly!'

'I did not, sir,' I said indignantly, going very stubborn.

'D'yer call me a liar? I said yer moved, didn't I. I won't have any boy lying to me, d'ye hear! D'ye hear, Pauly?'

'Dinna make him waxier by arguing,' whispered David.

'I wasn't lying, sir.' My temper was mounting like his.

'Don't argue with me, sir, or I'll give yer six of the best.'

'Dinna argue, man, say ye're sorra. Get round him.'

'I didn't move,' I whispered obstinately. 'Don't see why I should admit it.'

'Now—go on—play again—and when I blow this whistle Stop. Heaven help anyone 'oo moves. Didya hear that, Pauly?'

'Yes, sir.'

We played. He blew the whistle. We stopped in our tracks as if we were playing the game 'Statues'. The silence was painful and the most silent of all was Smith. His green eyes were boring me through.

'Yer moved, Pauly,' he said softly, cunningly, stroking his moustaches as if he had been waiting just for this.

'Sir, I did not!' I retorted, trembling with a gust of passion. Only with a tremendous effort did I refrain from stamping my feet. 'Sir, I did *not*.'

His face went red and his hair bristled: he was an angry wire-haired terrier. He was making a great effort to contain himself. The school was cowed by the flame of anger erupting from him, and everyone's heart beat more quickly.

'Yer a *liar*, sir!' he shouted. 'Go to the headmaster's room and wait for me there. Go on, yer miserable little liar.'

'I didn't lie, sir,' I said, white and angry and miserable—and afraid in my belly, with the kind of fear that is against your will. I walked slowly into the school, trembling as I passed him lest he should do me violence on the spot. 'I didn't lie.'

'Get on, you,' he shouted, giving me a shove. 'I'll deal with yer in a minute.' And he turned again to the school.

In the headmaster's study, waiting to be caned, I was saying to

myself, if this moment were two hours' time I should be sitting down to dinner and it would not be happening: if it were yesterday it would still be to happen all over again. If it were ten years' time I should be a man and I would clench my fist and hit him until he begged for mercy. By an act of will I tried to annihilate the moment and climb backwards or forwards in time. The dry-mouthed present obstinately remained.

'I'm going to cane yer, Pauly.' He was silky-voiced, pleased.

I did not open my lips and would not look at him. He took out the punishment register and began to write.

'Yer know why I'm going to cane yer, Pauly?'

'No, sir.'

He was refusing to get angry. He was saving it up. It made him all the more deadly.

'Yer moved twice, and yer lied twice. D' yer know that?'

'No, sir. I did not move. I did *not* lie, sir.' He had only to say I lied for my anger to climb, unsteadily, panting, over my fear.

'Then what I'm writing in this book is a lie? *I'm* a liar, eh?' He was beginning to tremble now. He wanted me to say he was a liar: he wanted to break me down and make me cry.

'Yer a perverse, obstinate boy. Reasonable treatment is no good for you. Only the stick.' He finished writing with a flourish. Though he wanted me to justify him, he was enjoying the exercise of absolute power.

'I did not lie, sir.'

'Put out yer hand,' he roared, playing with the cane. He held my wrist and swished me, grunting each time.

'That's what yer get for lying, sir!' he shouted, wiping the beads of perspiration from his forehead. 'Now will you admit it?'

'I didn't lie, sir,' I shouted back, struggling to keep back tears and writhing with my wealed hands under my armpits.

'I didn't lie. I didn't lie.'

'Get out!' he shouted, swishing me round the trousers and knees furiously to drive me out, and I ran out of the room from him. Anger kept me from tears and for the rest of the school day I spoke to no-one, not even David, but glowered, incensed at the whole world. When I knelt in my shirt at my bedside that night,



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still black and bitter with anger, I prayed. 'Please God strike Mr. Smith dead before morning so that everyone will know I did not lie. Please God make a fire or a flood come and destroy the book in which he wrote that I lied. Please, God, I did not lie. I did not lie. God help me this time and I will never do anything wrong any more. Please, God.'

Then after a pause, 'Thou knowest, Lord, that I might have moved a little tiny bit, without meaning to. But I'm not a liar, as Smithy called me, am I, Lord? Lord, Lord, tell me I'm not.' I said, rolling about in grief lest I had inadvertently lied.

Some years later I visited the old school to parade my vanity in having got a job I could boast about. It was not terrifying any more, only sad. The hot, moist smell of children in the classrooms was oppressive. They looked at me eagerly and saucily, welcoming a break; it was their school and I no longer belonged. They would not remember that I had once been champion swimmer and captained the football team. The gruff, awkward, pimpled boys of the fifth might once have been restless flashing juniors spilling in the playground with me. There was no way of telling now that the universe had shifted around and all values had become so mixed. Were these the teachers who had frightened us, the elderly ladies, the worn little men?

I found Smith in his classroom wearing the same old green tweed suit. His moustache was more frayed than ever and his thinning hair more disorderly. He peered uneasily from sunken eyes at my tallness, brushing his moustache with the back of his hand, his forehead wrinkling interrogatively. He looked smaller, and between his withered neck and his collar you could have thrust your fist.

'Why, Pauly,' he said with a wary, unhappy smile. 'I didn't reckonize yer at first.'

'Hello, sir,' I said, smiling and tongue-tied because in one glance all my hatred of him had died.

'Carry on with lesson sixteen,' he shouted to the class, the old tyranny unconsciously back in his voice. 'And mind what I said about halving.'

'I tell you what, chaps, "Banged" must be *Bang! Bang!*'

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whispered a small boy in the class, provoking a ruffle of laughter.

‘And no talkin’!’

‘How yer doing, Pauly?’ he asked self-consciously looking away from me and down at the noisily shunting wagons of the coal-sidings moving backwards and forwards in an interminable game of snakes and ladders which began long before I went to the school, and which would outlast Smithy and myself.

‘How yer doing, Pauly?’

I had been planning how I should tell him. Airily I had thought—as if it were nothing—‘Oh, editing a paper, sir.’ Oh yes, I *was* editing one. It came out once a month and cost 3d. and was called *The Open Road*. I wrote most of the articles too and was being paid four pounds a week. But all of a sudden I saw that it was a shabby little paper, amateurishly managed and edited and certain to go bankrupt soon and I was deeply ashamed of it and of my own conceit. So I now said ‘Editing a paper!’ rather shortly, as though I hated having to admit it.

‘Good boy,’ said Smith. He turned from the railway snakes and ladders to regard me with shy swift dubiety, then looked back again at the view which the more it changed the more it was the same thing.

‘I always knew you’d got it in you. I always knew you’d got it in you, Les.’

He tugged furiously at his moustache, as if he wanted to tear it off and his mouth gave an involuntary twitch. He had developed a tic.

‘Good luck, Pauly,’ he said. ‘Good luck.’

Was I mistaken or was there really a sentimental moistness in this old man’s eye?

In the parish hall the last school concert was over. As Suliman in a Special Constable’s hat and a bath robe I had climbed for the fifth and last time into Fatima’s boudoir, through a piece of unsafe window scenery made in the woodwork room and sworn to her that I loved her dearly and would rescue her from the death that had overtaken Bluebeard’s other wives, then kissed her on her plump red lips—she was the red-haired girl I was in love with



now and then—and climbed out of the window again (while the hall shook with the school's laughter) at the sound of Bluebeard's voice (off). In the last act I fought and killed him with a wooden sword, but I would rather have done Hamlet which I knew off by heart and whose sorrows were as great as my own. I had won an elocution prize with the speech to the players and after that I used to practise all Hamlet's speeches in front of Mother's mirror.

We had promised to clear up the stage and stayed behind in the parlour of the church hall waiting for the audience to go.

David scouted around the cupboards and found some bottles of Communion wine. It smelt rich and sickly.

'You can't drink that,' I said. 'It would be a sacrilege. You can only drink it at Communion.'

'Talk sense,' said David. 'Ask Dickie Weeks. Dickie, it's nae sacrilege tae drink this if it hasna been consecrated, mon, is it?'

Dickie Weeks agreed with him.

'Well,' I said, for this had never occurred to me, 'not being consecrated does make it kind of all right, I suppose?'

So we drank it out of the Mothers' Union tea-cups stored in the cupboard. It was sweet and warming and we stretched out our feet like old toppers to the stove. It made us sleepy.

'If ah had auld Smut here,' said David, 'I'd sit on his heid. Did ye notice his false teeth clacking when he was laughing at Les?'

'What was he laughing at me for?' I asked, bridling at once.

'Oh, jest in the play, ye ken.'

'Smut isn't so bad,' said Dickie, sadly and wisely. 'My father has false teeth. It's nothing against anyone.' He looked grown-up and tolerant, his long limbs stretching out easily. In his eye was the vision of being grown-up. This unimaginable thing was to begin for us to-morrow.

'It's a daft play, *Bluebeard*,' said Dave.

'It's a good play for a *school*,' said Dickie.

'I'd rather have done *Hamlet*, chaps,' I said.

'It's nae Ophelia ye want to kiss, mon, she gets drowned,' said David with a cackle and winks all round.

'Let's have some more wine,' said Dickie.

Dickie poured some more of the sweet claret in my cup and I walked around with it reciting:

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*O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!  
Or that the everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on't! O, fie!*

We cleaned up hilariously and let ourselves out into the deserted street. We stuffed our school caps into our pockets and lit up cigarettes. We were men: we were tall and had long trousers. Our voices were gruff and dark hairs shadowed our upper lips. We had almost arrived at the legal age and passed a policeman with a nonchalant good night. To-morrow we should leave school. We were frightened.

The April moonlight was soft and perfect. In its light the polarded plane-trees blowing in the wind were rows of giant spiders sitting on posts waving their attenuated limbs. The railway cutting was a straight silver canal with dark misted sides. The screaming train fled down it like a rocket bearing souls into the pit. Couples were strolling together across the golf course and David nudged me.

'I'll bet I know what they're going to do,' he said. That shocked me but I laughed all the same.

'Let's not break up when we leave school. There's nae need,' said David presently and he linked arms with us.

'Let's go on meeting,' I said. 'We can go swimming.'

'It'll have to be in the evenings after work,' said Dick. We were unwilling to surrender our last night of boyhood. To-morrow we should leave school and the day after, and the day after that, we should not meet as inevitably as for five years past. We might never meet again unless we planned to, and we were shy of making plans. Plans revealed the completeness of the break-up. We walked past the dark shuttered rows of houses, dropsical in the shadows of their glinting roofs, our boots ringing on the silver pavements, and talking about the big things we were going to do. We could not bring ourselves to part.

When I got at last to my bedroom, my brother was fast asleep.



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I put the candle on the dressing-table and stared at my mysterious face in the mirror and stroked the dark hair on my lip that would soon have to be shaved. It seemed to me that I had lost David and Dickie for ever: that I would never see them again.

'I have had playmates,' I said. 'I have had companions, in my days of childhood, in my joyful schooldays, All, all are gone, the old familiar faces.'

The luxury of this purely literary emotion quite overwhelmed me, and in the morning, at the last session, when presents were made and speeches said, and we bade good-bye to the Miss Ingram who had piloted us patiently through five years and of whom we were very fond, I was too unhappy even to strut about lamenting that the world was out of joint, O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right.

## Chapter Ten

### LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL

You see the idea? Keep his mind off the plain antithesis between True and False. Nice shadowy expressions—'It was a phase'—'I've been through all that'—and don't forget the blessed word 'Adolescent'.—  
C. S. LEWIS

**T**he dirty rattling steam train bore me through the green valley, past Wells' firework factory, past the old school (the green-capped boys just visible on the roof playground), past the miserable cottages where closet doors swung open on rotten hinges, and the garbage bins overflowed in backyards, past Roly's house and plunging deeper and deeper rattled under the New Cross bridge where in the arch of a buttress supporting the cutting there was still a chalk cartoon of Little Willie, the Hohenzollern heir-apparent.

Tributaries of steel flowed towards us. We rode on the tops of houses on shining bands, into a palpable dust suspended in the air and manufacturing incomparable dawns, seraphic sunsets. The locomotive sheds, shrieking and fuming with interior battle, bowled towards us. We smelt suddenly the incense of a forest woodyard, then chocolate biscuits, then pungent hops. We revolved round the Tower church and Tower Bridge and bursting strenuously over the maze of points ran at last into London Bridge, the fog and gloom enveloping us like the shadow of death.

With a million other season-ticket holders, in a bowler hat which had belonged to Dad, I pressed across the bridge, joining the undulating serpent which was scaly with umbrellas in the rain or burred with top hats, homburgs, velours, and bowlers in the dry. We rushed onwards with the urgency of lemmings keeping their appointment with the sea.

In Leadenhall Street I would meet Speke thrusting towards the rookery to which we both belonged. He walked with an



LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL aggressive roll about his short, almost deformed body which bore so huge and primeval a head, so ugly and set a jaw. He would look up at me with a grunt, and without a pause in his hammering pace. I was hard put to keep up with him. Speke was Irish, had a Catholic education and was estranged from his father; his long paleolithic face, narrow-browed, topped by black curly hair, was shut and non-co-operative: he rejected all this and his bearing defied anyone to try to make him accept it. The Rover Scout badge in his buttonhole first induced me to talk to him and we quickly became inseparable, spending night after night marching about London, intoxicated with talk and mutual confession, drinking coffees in Lyons' teashops until we were broke. Later on Roly was to join us in these peregrinations.

Mitre Square, our destination, housed the International Tea Company, for which we both worked. It was third best for me. Top score would have been a bank, like Kenneth; not aspiring so far I had not even applied. Besides the war was long over and banks could pick and choose now and seldom took less than a secondary school boy. Second best would have been an insurance or shipping office (for shipping had not yet crashed). I had been interviewed for the Savoy Hotel (on the grounds of a knowledge of French and Italian) but when asked what twelve pounds of steak of French and Italian) but when asked what twelve pounds of steak at one and ninepence three farthings a pound would cost, I was too flummoxed to work it out and the answer I guessed at turned out to be wrong. Innocent of this, Mitre Square took me into the secretarial department under the impression, rapidly to be dissipated, that I could write a good copper-plate hand in its share ledgers. They paid me a pound a week.

In our cobbled square the East End began. The chanting of the synagogue filled its occasional silences. In the alley leading to the synagogue Jack the Ripper had slashed a woman to death. Aldgate and Whitechapel were a city of the phoenicians and when, for economy's sake, I caught a workman's train I killed time watching the ceremonial slaughterings of cattle under the raised hand of the rabbi, bearded and petticoated and wearing phylacteries. The back streets were full of small shops selling strings of sausages, black, red, and grey, gewiltefische, smoked meats, gherkins, matzos biscuits, herbs, and wines as romantically titled as *Tears of Christ*.

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Lascars, negroes, Chinamen, Balkan Jews decorated the pavements. It was a world.

It was the year of the heat-wave and I watched with envy the naked urchins bathing in greasy canals. The miners had been on strike all through the hot days and now the air of London was cleared of soot and the city was filled with the spaciousness and clarity of Greece. The sunsets behind Saint Paul's dome were as glorious and as troubled as the thrones of God. The papers carried pictures of miners bathing or playing football and of blind pit ponies led into pastures they could not see, but the menace of the Triple Alliance hung like thunder in the black triple column headlines. There might be another kind of war and I was going to join Lloyd George's strike-breaking National Guards for which the minimum age—which I had reached—was sixteen.

Through Aldgate the red demonstrations from the East End marched. Lansbury, Bevin, Jack Jones, Thurtle, Ben Tillett, Will Thorne, the Dockers' tanner men, the protesting Poplar Councillors, who afterwards went to jail, led them and the mobs behind them bore red flags and banners, burning against the sombre background, stabbing the sky, dipping and rising as they swam inexorably forward possessed of a life of their own. On the blue and red trade union banners symbolic workmen held aloft hammers or axes or clasped hands of friendship across embroidered globes. Slogans threatened: 'Workers of the world unite: You have nothing to lose but your chains.' 'Unite against the Bosses.' 'Unite for the Social Revolution.' They demanded expiation in blood. These men and women were strange to me; they had worn, troubled faces and lean uncared-for bodies and grey clothes; some had the eyes of priests or fanatics and some walked soberly and ashamed. The coloured men were as glad as children to be in a procession, but the women stared around them as if they were just out of prison.

Hostile to the pageant, opposing the red torrent, little posses of mounted police on steeds of exquisite beauty with aristocratically twitching flanks moved restlessly in back alleys waiting for the word to ride out and draw their truncheons from their polished leather holsters and batter back the masses, hunting down the flags, staining them indeed with blood.



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'Cossacks!' the crowd shouted, and my hackles rose. I shivered, waiting for the clash. But the policemen, groomed like their horses, sat as impassive as statues on the dancing steeds.

'The great unshaven,' said Speke contemptuously, turning his back on the marchers. 'The brainless masses. The common herd.'

Neither of us belonged to the masses, we asserted. We were superior to them, though my suit was my brother's frayed cast-off, and I had only a shilling a day to buy my inadequate dinner.

The Square was off the road. We were the only masses that invaded it and we did so because we supposed that this was the proper way to earn a living. We swarmed breathlessly in at eight-thirty in the morning, running from our trains and buses. Then, idling much of the day through, I hung over the broad ledger counter of the secretarial office watching the wagons manœuvre up to the loading platforms of the tea warehouses and the backing horses sweat and shudder as they clattered backwards over the cobbles, urged on by the carter's cursing or the violent jabs of the vanboy. Their knotted muscles quivered under muscular flanks, their eyes were wild and nostrils dilated with terror. Into the grim, sooted industrialism of our square, for which many generations of horses had docilely laboured, their plaited manes, sculptured heads and thick necks arching as heraldically as those of a medieval chivalry imported an alien beauty. In the warehouse above them, the tea girls from whose eyes and faces civilization had drained an older dynamic chattered and sang while they tended the automatic packing machines. I watched the steel fingers, delicate, ruthless, and exquisitely timed, stuff paper packets with tea and label them for the shops.

If they were bold and did not fear the sack, the pale girls would wave to me and invite me up. I was the right age they said, to begin.

Stillwell, who was my chief, a baby-faced young man asthma had saved from the war and to whom a diet of cod liver oil and malt was presenting double chins, would come and lean beside us on the counter and talk about religion.

'I can't see what it is that people believe in,' he said. 'You could understand them believing if there was something sensible to

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believe in. People going to heaven and sitting about on damp  
clouds playing harps!

Miss Franklin and I laughed. Though she was so young and had  
the merriest eyes of any person I had ever met, her hair was going grey.

'Then turning water into wine!' He attacked Miss Franklin  
directly. 'You don't believe in a lot of rubbish like that, do you?'  
He rested his hand on his chin and gazed at her with longing.

'I'm not listening to you,' she said blushing prettily. Her eyes  
were laughing and her nose turned up. 'It doesn't make any differ-  
ence to me what you say. It just goes in one ear and comes out of  
the other.'

'Yes, but if you believe something, it's got to be *possible*,' he  
said. 'You can't just believe.'

'It's got nothing to do with anyone what I believe. I don't have  
to answer to anyone what I believe. I believe what I want.'

'Tcha!' He spat with amused disgust at the cobbles of the  
square, as though he'd bitten something acid. He thought it funny  
that anyone should believe anything at all, but he did not really  
mind. It was all the same to him so long as you did your work.  
Arguing over the counter about religion was one way of flirting at  
the tea break.

'And who was it—old Elijah—got God to send bears to eat the  
kids up when they called him rude names in the street. How can  
anyone believe in that?' He turned, smiling all over his absurd  
baby-face to the office, enjoying the fun hugely. 'A lot of rot like  
that. Do you believe it, Paul?'

I blushed and bit my lip. I wanted to be a man of the world  
too and say 'Yes' as cheekily as Miss Franklin, or 'No' with the  
same amusement that he showed, and not care what the answer  
was. Unfortunately I did care.

'I believe in God,' I said obstinately.

He blinked a little at my bad taste then laughed as if I had said I  
believed in standing on my head, and spread himself out over the  
ledger counter, crossing his legs and leaning back expansively.  
His grey suit looked superb. He smiled on me as though I were an  
aboriginal he had just persuaded to perform a comical tribal  
ceremony.

'You can't, Paul. It's all old wives' tales.'



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He waited for me to reply but I did not know any arguments about what I believed. It had never been a matter of debate before and so I remained gloomily silent while he gazed triumphantly around the office and then intimately into Miss Franklin's eyes again. He pulled a fat Turkish cigarette from a silver case, lit it and puffed an expensive oriental odour at us.

'Talk isn't everything,' said Miss Franklin winking delightedly at me. 'You can prove a lot of things by talk but it doesn't mean anything. You can prove black's white. And *you* could talk a donkey's head off *anyway*. Don't listen to him, Paul. You believe just what you want.'

'*I'm not,*' I said, *staring* out on to the dung-strewn cobbles and at the clattering horses and thinking, *something* makes all this happen, makes me *be*, makes Stillwell talk, and his arguments seemed nonsense then. On the other hand, what about hell, miracles, and did God answer every silly little prayer? All these questions pricked vaguely in my mind. What were the answers?

I mentioned these talks to Roly and sought his opinion. We were walking on Sunday, in our best, through the country ravished by the new building. We passed through gaps in torn hedges and walked delicately along planks crossing foundation trenches, and sometimes climbed ladders to unfinished upper storeys in an aimless curiosity. The exposed earth and the pile of bricks had a *curious sour smell*. Nettles flourished and piles of washed gravel stood around and the *scars of lorry wheels* criss-crossed the turf. It was saddening.

'Well,' he said, pushing the question away from him brusquely with a physical movement of rejection. 'Why ask me? Make up your own mind.'

I stopped, shocked and angry, for it was clear immediately from his supercilious tone that he agreed with Stillwell. His silhouette was plump against the glittering turquoise sky. He seemed so anxious not to give me pain that he clearly felt guilty. 'Miracles are a tall order,

'Well,' he said at my savage look. 'Miracles are a tall order, anyway, old man.'

Stillwell and Miss Franklin I did not mind. They could believe what they liked, but Roly was my friend and this from him was searing treachery. It shook the accepted foundations.

LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL

'Don't you believe in God, then?' I asked fiercely, trembling with the same fear and rage I should have felt if in the war he had announced himself pro-German. 'You must believe in God.'

'Well, it's not exactly that, old man. It's just that miracles are a bit of a facer. You must see they're a bit of a facer, after all there are certain facts to be got over. Oh, I believe in God all right.'

'Only I don't believe He can make a little miracle or two. That's not believing.'

'Well, if you have to put it that way, where's the proof that he ever does anything like that?'

'Well!' I said, so angry I could have hit him. 'Well!' I turned and ran from him among the unfinished buildings and piles of builder's gravel. He followed me, full of a desire to soothe me, his plump face sweating anxiously. He was afraid of my rages.

'Well, no need to get upset, old man. No need to go off the deep end.' He was very placatory. 'I only said what I think and really God's a matter of ethics. There's not the least need to get your rag out.'

'You must believe in God, you must!' was all I could reply out of my deep disgust, and I would not accept his assurances that he could believe with reservations. It was as good as not believing at all, I cried out. And if you did not believe what meaning, what possible meaning could life hold?

'The fool hath said in his heart "There is no God!"' I said.

Roly's defection hurt and troubled me—by its casualness above all; as though, as with Stillwell, belief or unbelief were unimportant and this I could not accept. And that he could have come to this view without my finding out before bewildered me. Yet I was afraid that he might affect me and I cease to believe too, and disbelief loomed up not as an act of choosing the true from two opinions and discarding the untrue, but as an illness of the mind from which at night I prayed to be spared.

We walked home through wet fields and over rotting stubble, and aimlessly through the builders' wasteland again, unable to talk, we had become so estranged. It was a painful and memorable walk.

Outside my house under the street lamp which poked its glass cage into the plane-tree's dying poll we stopped and Roly lit a cigarette.



LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL

'The important thing about religion is not to get emotional,' Roly said in cold repulse. 'To look at it for its ethics, not its superstitions.'

I was angrily silent, studying the pattern on the bole of the plane-tree.

'For instance, you want to read about Sufi'ism, like me, Les, old man. If you like I'll lend you a book. Christianity is only one of many religions.'

He was as puffed-up as a cockatoo about Sufi'ism and I hated him for it.

I did not answer.

My vicar, who had written a book on Origen, had a shaven head and the stern, hard face of a recluse who prayed wearily in the small hours of the night and for whom religion was one long struggle to reach God. Worship was his religion; not doing good in the parish, or organizing the Boy Scouts but something else, something far away from them. He was High Church and made the altar beautiful and created a Lady Chapel. His servers, of whom I was one, were dressed for mass in embroidered stoles, white surplices, and red cassocks. We came to early morning mass on a special roster and always without breaking our fast and with candles gravely lighted, and genuflection to the altar and movement to the right and left, with the low fervent prayers and the wafer of bread and the sip of wine, performed in the beams of the morning sun our holy dance to the Lord.

Once a week we could take our troubles to him in his study. And so one night I burst on him, spilling out at him in one rush, for I was afraid of him, 'Sir, how is it possible for there to be virgin birth? Sir, don't be angry, but how is it possible?'

He got up with a sigh and without looking at me went over to the window and gazed out on to his immaculate lawn where a child was playing. His grey face was in profile and he stared at something I could not see and I could not tell what he was thinking.

'Son,' he said, 'you must have faith.'

'But, sir——'

'Father.'

'Father, I've prayed.'

LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL

'You must go on praying. All things are possible to the Lord. If he made you and your faith and your unbelief, can he not do everything?'

'Yes, father, but how——'

'Come and pray with me.'

And he made me kneel with him by his shabby sofa and pray, looking out on to the lawn where the child was playing. He did not look at me, but kept his tired face averted as if he were ashamed and said, 'We must all pray, Leslie.' But something was dropping inside me, like a fire going out and I had been unable to pray. Just as on the day I was confirmed.

I left him with an embarrassed rush which made me knock down the little boy playing on the lawn. I set him on his feet. 'Don't you look where you're going?' I demanded.

'I'm blind,' he said, and I saw his discoloured eyeballs turned vacantly towards me. 'I'm blind.' He struggled to keep back tears, his lips trembling. I was horrified at my clumsiness.

'He's my boy,' said the vicar apologetically. 'He's blind and couldn't see you coming.' In remorse and confusion I rushed out of the gate, slamming it after me.

Speke had talked of personal experiences of black and white magic as we walked about London, pushing his hands deep into his pockets and thrusting his unhappy face forward, peering short-sightedly at the dusk illuminated like a flaring fair-ground, as if to see the supernatural pinned there for all to read. He had nodded understandingly when I had mentioned Roly's or Stillwell's views and I thought to myself, 'He is a man who understands what it is to believe' and was myself strengthened.

We stood at the corner of Houndsditch one night in August when the British Association was meeting. Bishopsgate was marbled with rain and the people moved in a ceaseless fretting stream along its banks, hurrying purposefully under umbrellas like upturned black tulips as if their lives depended upon arriving. They moved like a noble flood through the canyons and caverns of man, under the forest of stone pinnacles, towers, and chimneys. Breasting the flood the newsboy stood with the yellow *Star* poster flapping wetly against his knees: 'S . . . . Denies Soul' it said.



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A Carter Paterson van swung into Houndsditch with rearing regal horses, satin-skinned with rain, like a Persian chariot scattering the Jews, parting the river with thunder and battle shouts. The red open-topped buses advanced in close array with the decorum of royal barges at a regatta.

I smiled at the poster, confident in God.

'Fancy anyone saying there is no soul,' I said. 'Silly. Idiotic.'

Speke cocked his massive head to one side and pursed his lips with a smile which tokened private information about the universe.

'Not necessarily silly,' he said. 'By no means. It all depends, but I wouldn't say *silly*.'

He looked at me generously, full of an especial friendliness, willing to make allowances, holding back a certain eagerness to help me, to point out where I was wrong. All this warmth did not dissipate the darkness which began to surround me now that I saw he, too, did not believe in God. The tide of my unhappiness, usually extinguished while with him, began to rise again. I was desperate about sex and because its cinematograph performed unceasingly in my head had made a private vow never to marry, for I should never be worthy. My job made me unhappy when I thought about it—which was often. One was agitated with the fear that life had nothing more to offer than scratching away in ledgers and so was just a gigantic hoax. The vanishing countryside affected me with a personal sense of loss, the more acute now that I was working all day in the city and saw no more than a patch of blue tenting, the black warehouses and the gaping backyards of the houses my train passed by.

Yet always God was my friend. What He was, or how He came to be, or what He could accomplish did not matter. One felt Him there behind the seen world, increasing one's stature, exalting one's soul, like the splendour of a summer day divined in a shuttered room. A twilight was falling over that outer day, that other sun. Speke could not see that I did not want to listen now that I knew he did not believe. He stared at my averted head.

'Not necessarily silly. And after all what do you mean by the soul?' He rubbed his boot along the greasy mire at the pavement edge and rumbled his hair with his hand. A coldness fell between

LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL us and I was so afraid of losing him as well as God that I could not reply with the asperity that would have served with Roly or Stillwell.

'What do you mean?' I asked in the small voice of misery, after a long silence.

'Well, Les,' he said, taking my arm and squeezing it, desperately trying to be friendly, trying to make me feel better. 'Lots of people—scientists, I mean—say only matter exists for instance. It's nothing terrible.'

In Bishopsgate the gigantic stone façades of banks and offices stood up like quarry faces—they were matter. Around me crowds were surging to the stations—they were matter. The rain was falling—that was matter. There was Speke's voice—was that matter? Then mind—what about mind?

'You've got to believe in things that are reasonable. No-one has ever got hold of a soul and looked at it, as you might get hold of a germ and look at it under a microscope. You've got to see a simple thing like that.'

(I thought of my Aunt Florrie, who would have been quite certain that she had seen souls.)

'Science can't admit anything it can't get hold of and look at. Chaps like you and me are the scientific sort—we've got to be. We're *progressive*. You can't dissect a soul. No blooming fear. You can't find it.'

He propelled me by the arm along Houndsditch, past the gesticulating Jews and the gaudy haberdashers, but I saw nothing. It was all dark.

'What about mind? What about that then? What about all that goes on in your mind? You can't see it, but you believe in it!'

A shadow of annoyance passed over his face, extinguishing the friendliness. He dropped his arm.

'The grey matter of *homo sapiens*,' he said bitterly. 'The cerebrum, so called. In plain English, man, the brain. Any fool would know about the brain.'

We walked along like shadows, our friendship in peril. 'God then——?' I asked, stiff with resentment.

He rasped the back of his hand on the bristles of his chin and



LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL smiled a wounding smile of superiority. He waved a huge hand against Houndsditch, annihilating it.

'Well, I'm not personally convinced. Not *personally*, if you get me, Les.' He shook his head firmly. 'Of course, I quite understand some people *like* to believe. But not personally, not me. Not now. Once—yes. But not now.'

Our boots measured the pavement and time with even pace. We walked as seriously as old men. In a moment Speke began to thaw again, to try to win me and he touched my shoulder with a light friendly hand.

'Of course, you're a poet really, Les. But don't think that I don't understand. I'm not made of iron. Of course I understand. After all, it isn't as if I haven't been through just the same as you. That's the truth. That's growing up. It's hardest on the sensitive types like you and me. But it's only a phase of adolescence.'

My silence must have seemed a kind of consent, as in truth it was. There was an inevitability about it, for I could find no answers. The rain had become a fine spray. It ran off my hair but clung to Speke's in delicate beads.

'Mark you, don't let *me* influence you—but what's the point of God? What's the point? I just don't get the point.'

There was a pause. We were back in Bishopsgate by the tobacconist's pinned to the front of Saint Ethelburga's. We stared into his shop window at a castle of Gold Flake and walked on towards Lyons. If he suggested a coffee then he was not going to drop me, but I was sure that he did not like me now.

'Speaking as a biologist,' he said, 'you don't need to postulate God. The idea's a nuisance—a survival, superstition.'

Then, warming to the argument, as if all along this was what he had been waiting to say:

'Besides, have animals got souls? I ask you. What about cats and eels and lice? And germs that give people diseases? I ask you as man to man.'

He moved his wet face close to mine, full of eagerness and friendliness, willing me to accede to his way of thinking, his eyes bright with sincerity. He was as afraid of being left alone in his unbelief as I in my belief.

'You've got to see all this, Les. You've just got to see. Religion's

LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL done some awful things. You'll really understand, Les, presently. It just takes time.'

I nodded, speechless with unhappiness. What could I say? What awful things? The Inquisition was Roman Catholic, as everybody knew, and had nothing to do with the Church of England. Speke seemed to dwell on a Himalaya of knowledge—a biologist, he said he was—while I had not even clambered up the foothills. I was deeply ashamed of my ignorance, which seemed too great ever to cure. From his Everest, Speke smiled down at me confidently, patronizingly.

'Lord, don't look so cut up. Who believes in God anyway? Not even priests. Let's have a coffee, shall us?'

We entered Lyons. It steamed with coffee and my glasses misted. The harsh lights flashed on the wet green and white swimming bath tiles. He clattered downstairs and I blundered after, threading through the tables of Jewish chess players in the midst of whom, an island of black looming through the blue tobacco smoke, a cloaked Catholic father, alone, was modestly drinking a bowl of soup. Speke led the way to an alcove under the pavement. Sitting down he swept the dirty crockery to one side with his forearm and rested on his elbows and jerked his head contemptuously at the priest.

'I could laugh. A chap called Joseph MacCabe was one of those, and he says——'

He had to shout to make himself heard. I shivered with sudden cold and loneliness.

Speke lent me two books—one by the Joseph MacCabe of whom he had so high an opinion—and I read them on the bus and going home in the train, and then in bed till the candle guttered out. Their titles now escape me but not their import, for slight as they were they presented to me the first organized system of ideas that I had come upon. They said that science revealed that animate and inanimate things were subject to discoverable laws and behaved in predictable ways. New events flowed inescapably out of a succession of earlier causes. The freely acting, freely willing living thing was an illusion. It had no more right to consider itself free than a football kicked about a field by twenty-two players. A new word



LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL—determinism—swam like a comet of ill-boding into my ken. Everything that was happening flowed back to a first cause (if there was a first cause) and you could if you liked think of the first cause as God, but that was rather ridiculous since even if there happened to be one, we knew nothing about it and it was a long time ago. Anyway, the authors argued, each in his own way, there was absolutely no evidence that God had ever intervened in the natural order of events from the very first. So if there was a God it was useless to ask for his intercession in worldly affairs. In all, belief in God was unnecessary and was a form of self-indulgence. The peoples of the world had worshipped lots of different Gods with contradictory characteristics, and all religions had opposed science and discovery in case it might weaken the hold of the churches upon the superstitious ordinary folk. Genesis was nonsense: the world was not created in seven days, but in something like millions of years. Jesus Christ was possibly a myth—certainly his miracles were only fairy stories.

The real thing was evolution. Life had evolved with great difficulty from the non-living matter and man had evolved from lesser living things after a struggle of incredible length in which weaker species and individual animals were slaughtered. Man was the finest result of evolution, but he was still evolving out of ages of superstition into ages of science and enlightenment and religion was one of the things he was evolving from: this was called progress. Lest, however, one took too much cheer from this one was warned that ultimately, *ultimately* (too far away to matter personally) the world would grow cold and all living things die, for the universe was running down like a clockwork toy.

I searched every nook and cranny of this evolutionary universe and could find no God.

The theory shattered absolutely the conception of the universe absorbed in childhood, of a world to which we are sent by a personal Creator, who watches our progress, is accessible to our prayers and to whom we return when we die. And it raised more acutely those other problems about the personal nature of God which seemed so impossible to answer. In what form did He exist? How could He really send His son down to earth to die? Nor aid Him by word or sign in that last agony? And miracles, what of



LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL them? How could one God be a Trinity? Oh, so many things accepted without thought, or never explained in terms I could grasp, had now to face a fierce, intransigent, scornful inquiry.

Though I prayed, it seemed that God was silent. I could not resist the fear that he was silent because he was not there. The awful compulsion came upon me to say 'There is no God.' Incertitude was the worst of all—it made me ill. I thought about it all day and in consequence did my work badly and was cautioned, but was so miserable that I did not care. The sack would only have been one disaster more. In moments when it would seem that I had forgotten the problem, it would intrude itself suddenly into consciousness and my mind would give a little leap of anguish, my body a physical start. For the new disbelief possessed all the marks of a hateful treachery and, so complex was my state, I pitied the increased loneliness of the God I thought of as a Person and was about to deny.

One morning during these weeks of decision I woke with so deep and strange an oppression in my breast that I fancied it was the onset of an illness. Yet my head did not ache and there was no fever in my limbs. What was it then that hung over me? What was it I had to remember?

Of course—there is no God. I tried in the limpid morning to understand this, to curl my mind round it as I smelt the bacon frying in the kitchen below and heard it sizzling in the pan, and listened to the bustling noises of the house summoning me imperatively into the morning routine. How should I be able to eat my breakfast or go to work with this sorrow on my mind?

There is no God, I said aloud, to the ceiling, testing the sound of it and the heavens did not fall and crush me. The window looked out on the backyards of the square of dingy houses, on the broken fences, on the untidy chicken runs, on our rose arbour the wind had blown flat. A cock crowed once on the shed of a neighbour's run and I waited for it to crow twice more. The old gentleman across the way with the silver hair and the trapped look was standing domestically at his back door in red carpet slippers, smoking his pipe and regarding the gentle autumn rain with timid disapproval. The trimmed hawthorn in Mrs. Brown's was a dull green hummock spangled with raindrops. The clothes-line was silver



LORD, MIND NO MORE YOUTH'S ERROR AND UNSKILL too. Only the ash-tree was triumphant, spurting upwards, indifferent to metaphysics, a slender green fountain, a vivid green banner, a spear. Yet all had changed, shrunk, grown meaner and somehow more despicable. There was no glory.

I rubbed my finger along the rough stone window ledge, feeling the nature of the inexplicable stone and pressed my forehead against the cold glass and stared at my hand moving of its own will in an emptied world, fed whether it wanted to live or not by a steadily beating heart. It was strange.

## Chapter Eleven

### O WHAT A WORLD OF EVIDENCES!

O what a world of Evidences! We are lost in abysses, we now are absorpt in wonders, and swallowed up of demonstrations.—

TRAHERNE

**T**he kindred set ready its tents in a vast circle round the Kin totem, a point of focus as real to us as the altar of a church. It stood on a pole, a bold figure K and a symbolic camp-fire in a circle, elaborately carved and coloured, dominating the patch of greensward set aside for the council fire. When we passed it we raised our arms in salute (except the puritanical opposition, which suspected idolatry) in a gesture which Hitler and Mussolini have since made familiar but which derived for us from the Indian sign of the open hand which meant 'I come in Peace'. It was completed usually by the greeting 'How!'

We stood beside our unraised tents and at a sign from the master of ceremonies we erected them by lifting the tent poles and the whole hillside dramatically flowered with pavilions.

The walls and roofs of tents were painted with camp-fires, Indian picture-writing, and symbolic green-clad figures, and beneath these canopies we sat in cross-legged quiet while a brilliantly robed procession of the chiefs beat the bounds of the camp and paused at each tent door to present us with the bodes—a carved oak leaf on an oak slab—to touch. When the full circle had been travelled, a herald in an embroidered robe quartered in scarlet and silver came to the totem pole and with a loud cry summoned us to the Council Circle. Clad in jerkins and cowls of many colours, and mostly of a homely and ill-fitting simplicity, we gathered in an uneven circle for the lighting of the fire which had not to be let die until our festival was ended. The Keeper of the Council Fire, over whose scarlet costume gold flames snaked, stepped out swinging a censer and intoning a collect beginning:



## O WHAT A WORLD OF EVIDENCES!

*Energy, energy, ceaseless energy.*

*The silent terrific energy of the Universe.*

*The fearful and wonderful energy of the electron.*

*Microcosm and macrocosm.*

*One. One. One is one.*

*All is energy. The energy of One.*

*Fire, the great symbol of energy.*

*Fire which leaps before us.*

*The Fire of Althing.*

*O Mighty Fire of Life!*

and lit the giant fire, the flames of which, a festival in themselves, presided over the Althingamote, the annual open-air assembly of the Kibbo Kift Kindred. Kibbo Kift was founded by that open-air enthusiast and romantic artist, John Hargrave, a renaissance figure whose career was to lead him to become, among other unlikely things, the founder of a disciplined and uniformed Social Credit movement and financial adviser to the Government of Alberta. Kibbo Kift meant proof of great strength, and the movement had gathered in its eclectic net, among other queer fish, Henry Nevingson, Evelyn Sharp, the Pethick Lawrences, Joseph Reeves, Rolf Gardiner, I. O. Evans, Millecan Dalton, Speke, Roly, and me.

We were the elect. In my small lodge we were absorbed with the sense of being chosen. We were going to change the world. The yeast of our brotherhood was going to ferment silently within society and transform man ('there was plenty of time—nature was in no hurry—it had taken half a million years to create man—we had no reason to begrudge a generation or two to the task of changing him'). A life of hardihood and austerity—to camp, living simply, with as few civilized gadgets as possible, using tents and equipment made by our own hands—was our first obedience. Turning away from the soft and squalid city life we sought to get hard physically, and independent, even solitary. We talked of the Silent Places, and scorned the common herd living in the Big Smoke. We were to form new non-industrial communities living by handicrafts or agriculture and to set new standards of vitality in societies vitiated by factory life and devastated by war. The Kin stood for peace, and part of it for pacifism, and that generous

## O WHAT A WORLD OF EVIDENCES!

internationalism of which Wells became the spokesman—a world currency, a world court, a world parliament, even a world language.

A shortened version of the Covenant of the Kindred described our aims as:

(1) The establishment of Land Reservations and Open Spaces for camp training and Nature-craft.

(2) By such training to inculcate pride of body, mental poise, and a vital spiritual perception.

(3) The encouragement of handicraft training and the development of a new interpretation of Craft Guilds, backed by the re-organization of social economics on the basis of the Just Price.

(4) The formation of Family Groups wherein the children shall be trained by their parents along woodcraft lines.

(5) The establishment of regional assemblies to work for the common weal of the locality.

(6) To stand as a witness for regional, national, and world peace based upon the equality of consumption to production.

(7) To help to bring about a world educational policy, world freedom of trade, a new world credit system, the abolition of political and financial intrigue, and the establishment of a world council, or Clearing House.

We had broken with our elders as Hargrave broke with the Scouts. We did not want to live in little boxes beside railways, where the smoke billowed and the grit fell over all and the smell of fish and chips from one corner mingled with the smell of stale beer from the other. We wanted a life with more meaning and fewer conventions and that is why we were members of the Kindred. We were not very certain how we were going to reach the goals laid down in the Covenant—except that we were going to train children—but we had no doubt that they would be attained.

Leaning back on my elbows at my tent door and gazing over the heads of the gipsy-like throng at the beech copses like plush cushions on the light green downs and at the straight black yew walks of the great house below I was supremely happy, carried above myself by my love of it all. For if the Kin did nothing else it



sanctified and inspired that burning passion for nature which, I was now able to see, had been with me from infancy.

Speke had brought me into the movement some weeks after our talk about God; in Houndsditch he had intimated with characteristic love of mystery that he belonged to a *secret philosophic Order*. I had no knowledge of what he meant and he proceeded from the first obscure, tantalizing hints to indicate that there was a movement which sent missionaries into the world to discover—in the way that he had discovered me—people suitable for its Order. They were like modern monks, or wandering friars, even to the cowls. They held to the way of truth into which all beginners had to be initiated. They imposed certain tests and mental ordeals, and practised certain rites. He used the word 'esoteric' quite often to describe the movement.

Roly and I were called to a meeting of Speke's lodge. It met in his room in Clerkenwell. It was a large back room in an eighteenth-century house with a window looking out on to a damp untended garden darkened by a poplar-tree. The room was untidy. Speke slept in a stale-smelling sleeping bag on a camp bed. His clothes were slung in various corners of the room. With crayons on the distempered wall he had drawn—quite ably it seemed to me—a huge 'mark' of the Kindred and the picture of a Kibbo Kifter in a green jerkin and cowl reaching out arms to the sun. A coloured picture of an owl (the lodge was the Owl Lodge) cut from a magazine was pinned over a bookcase full of second-hand books—Hargrave, Ernest Thompson Seton, *Voyage of the Beagle*, *The Blue Apes*, *She*, *The Biology of Sex*, *How to Develop an Attractive Personality*, *Fifth Form at Saint Dominic's*. A rucksack hung behind the door and a portrait of Darwin, venerable and ancient and bulbous-browed, over the fireplace in which pine logs burned.

'Brought the logs home from the forest,' Speke said. He laughed happily, for no reason save that he was proud to have us together. Beneath the portrait smouldered sweet-smelling cones in pagodas brought for the purpose from Woolworths. Roly, I, and a girl with straight dull hair and a discontented mouth, called Lily, came politely in together. Already seated was a boy of my own age with a sullen heavy face; he glared at me nearly the whole evening,

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Roly and I were called to a meeting of Speke's lodge. It met in his room in Clerkenwell. It was a large back room in an eighteenth-century house with a window looking out on to a damp untended garden darkened by a poplar-tree. The room was untidy. Speke slept in a stale-smelling sleeping bag on a camp bed. His clothes were slung in various corners of the room. With crayons on the distempered wall he had drawn—quite ably it seemed to me—a huge 'mark' of the Kindred and the picture of a Kibbo Kifter in a green jerkin and cowl reaching out arms to the sun. A coloured picture of an owl (the lodge was the Owl Lodge) cut from a magazine was pinned over a bookcase full of second-hand books—Hargrave, Ernest Thompson Seton, *Voyage of the Beagle*, *The Blue Lagoon*, MacCabe, Egyptology, *History of Magic*, *Tarzan of the Apes*, *She*, *The Biology of Sex*, *How to Develop an Attractive Personality*, *Fifth Form at Saint Dominic's*. A rucksack hung behind the door and a portrait of Darwin, venerable and ancient and bulbous-browed, over the fireplace in which pine logs burned.

'Brought the logs home from the forest,' Speke said. He laughed happily, for no reason save that he was proud to have us together. Beneath the portrait smouldered sweet-smelling cones in pagodas brought for the purpose from Woolworths. Roly, I, and a girl with straight dull hair and a discontented mouth, called Lily, came politely in together. Already seated was a boy of my own age with a sullen heavy face; he glared at me nearly the whole evening,

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his mouth twitching and his eyes winking, and spoke only in monosyllables. When 'I stared back into his dark-rimmed eyes he looked away sullenly.

Yet when we all began chattering about camp Speke grew stern and impatient and presently put on his spectacles (which made him look like the granny in the advertisement for Mazawattee tea) and pulled out some notes from his pocket. At that precise moment an owl hooted from the branches of the poplar-tree outside. The odd boy and Speke exchanged a smile of triumph.

'The owl always hoots when we have a lodge meeting,' said the odd boy as proudly as if he himself had invoked the bird.

Speke began in a voice like a parson, gabbling because he was unusually self-conscious.

'The group has two policies, an inward or esoteric, an outward or enunciative policy. The enunciative is scientific, the esoteric is philosophic. We seek the unity of the part with the whole, only by finding himself in the whole can man realize himself. Only by realizing himself can man find inward peace, only by inward peace can man wage war. But before man can realize himself positively in the I AM, he must realize himself negatively in the I AM NOT.'

He looked round us in stern inquiry.

'I take it,' he said, 'no-one can possibly be opposed to these simple principles?'

As we had no idea what he meant, but could not admit it, we all made haste to agree. I made a mental note to look up 'esoteric' and 'enunciative' in Mother's Nuttall's Dictionary: perhaps 'philosophic' too.

'Well then,' he said. 'I will proceed with the philosophical initiation.'

He coughed and studied us and we waited.

'To go through the Abyss you must realize that nothing exists. *Nothing*. I don't exist. You don't exist. All this is illusion.'

He waved his hand round the room solemnly obliterating it. The perfume of incense from the mantelpiece made his words seem the more profound and mysterious.

'But how, sir?' said Roly politely.

'Ah now,' said Speke with the enjoyment of a chess player who has sprung a trap on an opponent. 'That's just it. How? This is



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where science comes in. When we analyse matter we get down to molecules. After molecules, what?’

‘Atoms?’ asked Roly, after some doubt.

‘Yes, atoms.’ Roly looked pleased. ‘Atoms. But what are atoms? What *are* they?’

We did not know and so we looked at him and waited.

‘Why, they are nothing solid at all. Bits of energy flying around. Electrons and protons are negative and positive electricity revolving round each other. Now suppose you took away one of the negative bits, what would happen?’

We did not know.

‘Why, there would be no atom. A negative can’t exist without a positive. Take away the negative and—poof—he blew as if blowing out a match—‘the positive vanishes. Poof—poof—both vanish. Nothing is left. Nothing exists.’

We waited.

‘So all that exists is nothing. Is little bits of energy floating around. Little bits of nothing in great empty space.’

‘But *can* you take away the negative?’ Roly asked timidly.

‘Well, scientists are trying,’ said Speke, brushing aside the idea.

‘They might end this universe if they succeed.’

‘Then——’

‘Hypothetically, you see. It’s all a hypothesis—but that’s the philosophic abyss. Ponder over it. Say—nothing exists. Say—I AM NOT. Realize it. And then when you are at the bottom of the pit, I AM NOT—I AM. I AM NOT cannot exist without I AM—nothing exists without its opposite. Then you are reborn.’

He was most anxious to be believed and I remembered the earnest curate at confirmation classes who had leant forward so eagerly, pressing his nervous hands together and gazing so sincerely at us saying, ‘Until your sins are forgiven you, you cannot be reborn.’

‘Well, there it is, that is the Abyss. The Abyss of self-realization.’

‘How soon can you be reborn?’ asked Roly earnestly.

Speke got up stiffly, humourlessly, lips compressed, with the look on his face that showed he found Roly’s questions altogether too childish, but did not want to discourage him. Really the truth

was that Speke was unsure of himself. Great rolling phrases like 'the abyss of self-realization' gave him pleasure but he hated being pinned down to defining them—he cannot have had much idea what they meant.

'We'll come to that later.'

'Yes, sir,' said Roly meekly, afraid that he had offended.

We talked about our next camp. We camped in a colony of tents, wigwams, and huts at Pole Hill, Chingford—not then built over. Lawrence of Arabia had a bungalow next door to us. It was said that after he had built it with his own hands the forest authorities complained that it was on forest land and that he could live on forest land only in a caravan or other movable dwelling, so he painted four wheels on his dwelling to keep within the law. He had dug a small diving pool and cemented it in and here we would plunge for hardihood's sake in the depth of winter. He would come to watch us, and in the evening when we held camp-fires he would come, surrounded by a court of Bancroft boys, to watch us from a little distance and listen to our singing, for he was very shy. At night the braves of Eppingthing would go deep into the forest and light a fire where the verderers would never find us and sing round it until dawn. Our members sloshed through the viscous Epping mud with bare legs and feet, with trousers rolled up the thighs even in the middle of winter in a spartan contempt of cold and discomfort, in a stern pride in facing all hardships. Once, going around thus, they had been stoned and hooted out of Chingford. We said we expected no less from the common herd.

In the passage, after the meeting, Lily with the dull hair and pale face flung herself upon me as breathlessly as on a windy hill.

'Oh, Speke tells me you are a poet.' (I had just burnt all the poems I had written since I was fifteen. They were excruciatingly bad and all of them invoked God.) 'How wonderful to have a poet in the lodge. Do you like Rupert Brooke? I have just been reading his letters. I think he is so like Carlyle.'

On the steps Speke buttonholed me confidentially as the odd boy went down the street. He jerked his head at the departing lad.

'Did you see him—Stone—did you see his twitches and winks?'

'Yes, I did. What's wrong with him? Is he ill?'



'Oh, but he meant those. Confidentially, I think he was trying to work magic on you.'

My eyebrows rounded. I felt a faint disgust. What on earth did Speke mean by all this talk about magic?

'Witchcraft,' I said, and laughed uneasily.

'I know you don't believe in it. But *he* does. So do other people. Besides—that owl to-night. *Every* lodge night. You can't get away from things like that. Science is only magic. It comes from magic. It's proved. Magic is only an occult way of trying to make matter do your will.'

I wanted to say I could not understand giving up believing in God in order to believe in magic but I thought Speke would be insulted—besides he must have thought this out—so I asked:

'Why try it out on me?'

Speke looked evasive; an uncertain smile played round his lips.

'Perhaps he doesn't like you.'

Was he mocking me? I could not bear to be laughed at and so I said no more.

In the train going home Roly sat in a state of beatification. He had at last got hold of ideas esoteric enough to satisfy him and he was filled with a deep happiness.

'A great man, Speke,' he said. 'A really great man.'

Roly's hero-worship annoyed me. It showed me too clearly the character of my own. Unbidden the disloyal feeling rose that it was silly. And the stuff about magic stuck in my gullet.

'He believes in magic,' I said, irrelevantly, turning away to look out at the streaming night.

'Men always have,' said Roly with the private smile which meant that he refused to discuss it and was not going to be influenced by me any longer. Sticking from his pocket was a book he had borrowed from Speke, *The Book of the Dead Explained*. I turned angrily to watch from the train window the brilliant lights of London spinning round on a plate of polished jet.

'I wish you wouldn't call him "sir",' I said irritably.

Stone did not dislike me, however. The next lodge night he walked down the road with me saying little, but outside the tube station he laid a hand upon my arm to detain me.

'We could hike together Sunday, if you're free,' he said, anxious lest I should refuse.

I shook my head and said that I had something else to do and he looked as though I had hit him. We stood in the fetid tube gale in a callow inability to make small talk.

'I think Speke ought to think about electricity. That explains God,' he burst out suddenly. 'Don't you think that it might easily be that *electricity* is God. Don't you think? Look here, it's mysterious enough. You can't see it and it seems to me it's everywhere. It *is* everywhere—and look what power it has. If Speke thought about electricity he might believe in God again. What do you say? What do you say?'

I said it was rubbish, that any fool could see that, and he looked very crestfallen. Any defence of God now annoyed and disturbed me as much as an attack had once done.

'But you haven't had a chance to think about it,' he persisted. 'The idea came to me suddenly. I can't see why no-one has thought about it before.'

He went off down the street, shaking his head gloomily. He was poor and thin and ill and tousle-headed and he walked self-consciously, nervously, as if he knew that I was watching him and did not like him, throwing his limbs about defiantly as if he were drunk a little, or a girl. The bodies of girls sometimes acted like that when you watched them, only more gracefully. His mackintosh had a rent in it and at his poignant figure my heart gave a wrench of pity. Lily has the same piteousness about her, I thought. We all have, perhaps. We are all lost and unhappy.

Although I had joked about the metaphysics of Speke's easy annihilation of matter yet privately the problem absorbed and worried me. If it was not true, where was the flaw in it? One reduced matter down and down until all that was left was the atom. About this, Speke was not wrong, for I had been reading too and the atom of physics was a solar system of its own. There was a terrifying analogy in a text-book. How did it go? If you placed a penny on the ground to represent the nucleus of an atom and then walked a hundred yards and put down another penny, that was the first electron of a whole series in similar relation and



of similar relative sizes. If this was not indeed the analogy then it was something closely resembling it, and the point of it was that each atom was a solar system in which space so far exceeded 'matter' (energy?) that it was indeed impossible to consider it as solid in any degree. Theoretically one material body could pass right through another without even its protons and electrons grazing. I could stand, seeming solid and complete, yet a great wind of space blew through me. No ghost was ever more tenuous.

However much scientists tried they would never probably split the atom. But they did not need to for the purposes of Speke's illustration, for if protons and neutrons and electrons were no more than scraps of energy rushing round in orbits, if the final analysis of life was no more than this, what was *I*? My own individuality, picked out by heaven knows what decree from many million others, so that I was I and no other, was one degree removed from a vacuum. My moral problems, my concern about sex and society and what it was right to do with my life appeared nothing at all when one thought of oneself simply as a whirlpool of assorted atoms having the temporary and illusive appearance of solidity and reality. But if all the bad things one grappled with no longer counted, what then of the good things—comradeship and love, and that sense of the unattainable loveliness of the world which was always coming upon me?

I wrote Speke's formula down on office paper and added my comments to each point and ended with the question 'And therefore nothing exists?' Unfortunately it became mixed up in an office file and reached Stillwell, who read it. He called me down and his comments upon it cannot be printed, even in Latin. I badly wanted to ask him why, since he was an atheist, the argument annoyed him for surely an atheist had to believe something like this, but I lacked the nerve. Now I shall never know.

My brother and I had obscurely pursued an ideal of hardihood all through childhood. (He was not with me in Kibbo Kift but was to join me later when I started my own youth movement.) In the scouts we had boxed, less because we liked to than because we wanted to be strong. We had graduated from wand drill to Indian clubs and we both possessed a pair of weighty clubs with which

we would practise in the garden. I became so expert with a number of limited movements that I would often go into the garden on winter nights to swing them in the dark until I was tired. and it was only occasionally that I smashed myself on the head (when I did, the blow would just about knock me out). All summer through we took cold baths and aspired to carry them on through the winter as well, and sometimes I succeeded, though never in becoming as hardy as Kenneth. This hardiness bore us in good stead at swimming at which we were both experts, winning many prizes and the school championships in succession. When we went for holidays my brother would drag me out of bed in the early morning for training runs and if the holiday was at the seaside we swam many times, and many hours a day starting before breakfast with the first and taking the last dip just before sunset. My ambition for a long time was to swim the Channel, and I could certainly swim several miles without tiring.

All this prepared me well for the hardihood programme of Kibbo Kift on which Roly and I made a start with a walking tour of Sussex. Our hike commenced the night our holidays began with a night march down to St. Leonards Forest, a distance of at least thirty miles. The forest was not new to me. In 1919 at the age of fourteen I had camped there with a school friend called Bowles. We possessed no rucksacks then, only scout poles, and no light-weight tent, only a heavy canvas officer's tent of pre-war make which we borrowed from our Scout troop. We had money enough to take us by train to Three Bridges only and from there we had to walk. We had no means of carrying the tent, blankets, cooking utensils and food for a week, except by a kind of stretcher rigged on poles. It was appallingly heavy and cut our hands and our shoulders but with herculean efforts we got it to the forest—we were to camp at a farm run by friends of Bowles—and there we stayed for our holiday, measuring out our daily rations with care for we had almost no money for food at all.

The demon of toughness pursued us there and because Bowles was a very good runner we rose early every morning and had a cold bath in an old horse trough and then ran three miles before breakfast.

It was to this spot that Roly and I were first to make our way



through the night (and the walk began with the ritual cold bath, of course). We did the journey without incident and without blisters, which means that Kibbo Kift must have done something for our hardihood, but the ordeal proved too much for me and I fainted clean away a mile or two from the camp site.

Nothing like this deterred us and after a day or two's rest we continued our walking tour. The rucksacks were home-made, being contrived ingeniously by Roly and his mother out of white army bolster cases. They were supported by broad white straps fastened bandolier-wise across our breasts. In these we carried everything, our tent and blankets, cooking utensils and much food, for as ever we had little money. The weight was enormous.

For me it was the most revealing fortnight I had yet lived, for the tour took us down through Sussex to Steyning, along the downs by Chanctonbury and Cissbury to the sea and then back from Chichester to the forest we had started from. Roly, unhappily, contracted rheumatism and groaned and complained much of the way but though I ignored this completely during the day it was less easy at night when the pains in his limbs became worse. He would rub them furiously, then in despair he would sing. He had a good repertory, which I shared, for we so often sang these songs together at his home on Sunday afternoons, 'A Friar of Orders Grey', 'Juanita', 'The Lincolnshire Poacher', 'The Young Indian', and many more, and was condemned to listen to these sung night after night, sometimes all night. But he did it with such enviable good humour that I was driven often to surrender all idea of sleep and join in.

At Steyning we slept in the old brewery which had no more than half a roof, among the rafters of which a cloud of swallows roosted and twittered all night and at dawn filled the air with a wind of wings. Dry and warm, I elected to sleep naked in my sleeping bag, for I had grown tired of sleeping with most of my clothes on. This proposal deeply upset Roly. It upset him more than the picture in the tiny lodge room in which we met upset the chela. He tried to persuade me not to. He did not like it, he said. He did not think it was right. What would happen if I had to get out suddenly in the night, or if someone came?

'Why, nothing,' I said. 'It would be dark.'

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But he would not have it. My wearing nothing in my sleeping bag outraged him. It was a calamity. He took himself off to the farthest corner of the room and flung himself down like an insulted dowager, so that he might not be in any way implicated.

'If you'd got any feeling for me you just wouldn't do it. Not now that you know I don't like it.' He was quite bad-tempered.

'Rot,' I said. 'Rot.'

He lit his candle at his end of the vast brewery and ostentatiously turned his back on me and read a book.

'You're just an old Sunday school teacher,' I said to his disapproving shoulders, indignant at being treated as though I were now contaminating the universe. 'One would think I was a leper.' Then, 'Besides, I often sleep like this in the summer.'

He would not be reconciled and every time we had an argument on our tour he would bring up against me the accusation that I did not know better than to sleep without clothes on, and was just about on a par with an Australian aborigine.

When we returned from this odyssey Speke greeted us at the station with a dark and unhappy face. It was some moments, in the clamour of Victoria's reeking halls, before we could get him to speak.

'Stone has gone off his head,' he said. He told us that Stone had turned up at the camp one morning and gone round to everyone saying earnestly, 'I am the light and the way, forsake all and follow me,' or words to that effect. They thought it was a joke but when it was clear that he imagined himself to be Jesus they took him home and from there he had gone to an asylum.

The news made us cold and frightened. If only, I thought, I had been kinder to him and pretended to take an interest in his theory that God was electricity this might not have happened. Or if I'd gone hiking with him in the Forest I might have seen this coming on and helped him to get over it. But Speke gave no importance to the theory about electricity at all.

'Sex,' he exclaimed angrily. 'It's sex, sex! Sex is at the bottom of everything.'

That made me more frightened still, as though I were being



dragged down against my will into that pit from which I was ever trying to escape.

Now another spring had come, and my eighteenth birthday, and I lay on the grass with my head lapped on my rucksack and looked across at the elegant cushion of beeches on the down side beneath a sky of sapphire and milk. If you were a Gulliver among Lilliputians you could sprawl across the valley and rest your head on the beech clump.

Out of the sun that now belonged to the Kindred walked Speke and someone I did not recognize, in a halo of blinding light.

'Meditating, brother? Here's a kinsman who says he knows you,' he said abruptly and left us. The new kinsman raised his hand in Indian salute and said 'Hough'. I blinked uncomprehendingly into the light. It was David. We stared sheepishly at each other: I thought 'He looks as though he's wearing fancy dress' and the probability that he was thinking the same of me increased my embarrassment.

'Well, Dave!' I said in a voice full of wonder. He put a briar pipe between his teeth—he looked very young behind it—and replied in a resolute masculine way holding out his hand.

'It's ae the same, Les,' He was tougher, broader, less rabbitly.

We sat down, hardly knowing where to begin. Not to be outdone I pulled out the cherry pipe I was breaking in and accepted a fill. It had made me sick twice and now I treated it with caution.

'Speke asked me to join,' I said, nodding my head at the retreating leader of the Owl Lodge.

'It's nae sic a bad movement,' said Dave. 'Though it can be better.'

'How so?' I asked. Looking at the circle of tents, at the colour and the gaiety, the brown-limbed kinsmen, I thought it could not be made better. But we were going to have an argument and this made me feel at home with David at once.

'Well,' he said, tapping the briar bowl on his toecap. 'It's a lang story.' He looked at me in the straight aggressive fashion that was familiar from childhood. 'It's nae Red Indians we want sae much as Reds. It's nae red enough.'

I lifted myself on my elbows and gazed around. I wanted to show myself superior to the movement in front of him.

'It's certainly not red—looks a trifle green to me,' I said. But my little joke on our costume was lost. David was a Scot. His silence reproved me.

'It's a gae serious matter,' he said. 'I'm a socialist. There'll be no new world until ye get rid of the capitalists.'

Again the weight of my abysmal ignorance held me down. What *was* a capitalist? I was most uncertain. One could not admit to this for it was one of the constants of the talk around me: it was 'given'.

'How are you going to get rid of them?'

'Elections—votes, strikes.'

'Votes don't matter much to us, we haven't got any.'

'They will.'

'And what if the people don't vote for the socialists? They haven't much so far.'

'There's other ways, Russia did it: the Bolshevists. They had a revolution: the working class fought to get into power.'

'What's this got to do with the Kindred? It isn't going to kill people for its ideas. It doesn't want to. I don't want to kill people. There's been enough.'

'Ae it's a wee bit namby-pamby, maybe. But it's full of young people to convairt. It's the young people will decide.'

He sucked his pipe, smiling. He was going to convert me.

'An' there's need for a bit of democracy inside it too. There's a bit too much of the great I AM.'

Turning my face to the grass I thought about what he had said. His conviction and confidence were as impressive as Speke's about religion. And behind David was the urgency and pressure of a great movement: I could not escape it. It was there wherever I turned compelling me to make up my mind. A flight of goldfinches went sizzling over like golden darts. I saw a hawk stoop at the beech clump and the pigeons rise from it like feathers from a beaten cushion.

'There'll never be freedom, or equality or any ither sairt of brotherhood while men have nae jobs, or empty bellies. There's nae justice in that. Nae Christianity.'

'There's no killing in Christianity.'



'There's been plenty of Christians ready to fecht, always. An' if a little fechtin' against the rich and killing them off is going to get a new world order . . .'

He paused grimly, threateningly, a proletarian by choice. The avalanche of the left was descending on me. Shutting my eyes I saw the marching ranks move inexorably down the Whitechapel Road, join the confluent flood from Commercial Road, and move under the dipping and stabbing red flags:

*Then raise the scarlet standard high  
Within its shade we'll live or die,  
Though cowards flinch or traitors sneer  
We'll keep the red flag flying here.*

The hoarse hostile shouts enraged the crowds so that they shook and became dangerous. The grey men with bulging sagging clothes, the impassive police, the shining leather truncheon holsters, the horses groomed till they shone like varnished toys, all waiting. I watched them with my inner eye, breathlessly waiting the bloody clash, and trembled for it.

'Murder,' I said. The heads crumbled like eggshells and smashed brains clung to the uplifted truncheon. The crowd scattered, a horse tripped over its entrails. 'Murder.'

It was too much to bear and I turned over to behold the sun. The clean perfume of the grass was in my nostrils still. A small breath of wind shivered the grass heads.

'Ye canna be a traitor to your ain class,' said David softly.

I looked at him in surprise, still in my dream. What was my class?

'Ye canna side with the bourgeoisie.'

When David went over to his tent Speke who from a distance had been covertly watching us, came over, masterly, annoyed.

'Who was that chap?'

'A friend of mine. We were at school together.' I answered reluctantly, misliking his attitude.

'You didn't tell him anything? I hope you can trust him?'

'For heaven's sake—why?'

'Well, some people have their spies—you know—finding out what we're thinking and doing. I've even seen Brown Badger listening outside tents at night.'

'If you want to know he's a Red.'

'That's worse,' said Speke, setting his jaw. 'I'll bet you what you like the Reds would give their ears to find out what Owl Lodge was doing and planning.'

My round-eyed incredulity made him go faintly pink and he walked off, injured dignity in every line of him because of my so obvious disbelief. He was almost deformed in his squatness and his great feet left a heavy trail in the long grass.

I went back to my rest where presently Lily with the dull hair and discontented mouth came to join me. She threw herself down with enthusiastic limbs.

"'To one long in city pent'," she began. "'It is . . .'"

My chela, his face pinker than ever from blowing the twig fire under our gipsy can of tea, looked up and watched Lily with an open-mouthed disbelief in her existence. He thought her a great joke. He caught my eye and winked at me and wiped a smear across his face. Me, he followed affectionately around, like a dog, bringing me presents or things to look at, with a touching simplicity. He was brown to the waist and his long brown legs were covered with tiny golden hairs. I was at once proud and envious of him. How could anyone be so integrated and carefree?

Rudely, I got up and walked away from Lily. She was annoyed, and raised herself on one elbow.

'Are you coming back, comrade?' she called stridently.

'Presently.'

'Good. I'll wait. I want to discuss Edward Carpenter with you.'

Edward Carpenter's *Toward Democracy*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite*, were held to express the attitude of the Kindred to life. There could have been worse choices—though Trine was a queer one for a movement containing so many who shared Speke's views.

Strolling round the circle of tents, past the Garden School girls rehearsing Margaret Morris dancing for the evening festival, Tomahawk erecting his puppet show, Rolf putting up a black-board on which he had drawn a scheme for an international language on which he was going to give us a lecture and Millican Dalton and Pixie cooking eggs in a tin can over a fire of garbage,



I came to where David was sprawled out among his aggressive I. L. P'ers, reading *Arms and the Man*.

'Tell me more about socialism,' I said, dropping angrily beside him. 'Is it a rammy ye're after getting now?' he asked with a grin.

Joseph Reeves—Silvertongue—in a sky-blue jerkin, and G. S. M. Ellis—Shada—in russet which made him look like a figure out of Chaucer joined us and we began an argument—which was to go on all my life—as to whether one had the right to make a revolution against the capitalists if one had not the right to kill. Shada and Silvertongue had both been conscientious objectors in the war.

There Speke and the chela found me. Speke was proudly carrying a young owl on a cricket stump. The chela was dancing round it making short, excited jabs at it. It was a barn owl, bewildered by the bright sun, clinging for dear life with its talons to the stump and blinking its surprised eyes rapidly. Though so blinded by the light it yet followed the hand of the chela without ceasing and with no perceptible movement of the body it slewed its head this way and that like a snake and kept slashing back at the prodding hand, as savage as a cornered rat.

'Oh, you would, would you,' shrieked the chela. 'You'd fight me. I'll show you. I'll show you. Ah, you would! Well, we'll see, you just look out, we'll see! There! There! You couldn't hurt me if you tried. Just watch out! You watch out!'

He thought he could play with it like a puppy.

'Look, Otter, this owl had fallen out of a tree,' said Speke. 'Just near the *lodge* tents.' He looked at me in bright triumph. 'An *owl*, you see. You can't get over a real, live owl. We brought it over to show you.'

In my small bedroom a branch of the Owl Lodge was formed soon after this day. I had decorated one wall with a large print of an Academy picture of two young girls bathing in a Cornish rock pool, which I had been able to buy cheaply because it was shop-soiled: to this both Roly and my chela formed such strong puritanical objections that I had to turn it to the wall before they would agree to use the room as our headquarters. The Lodge of the Men of Endeavour, called Mendevo for short, opened its meetings with the lighting of an incense cone inside the little

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Woolworth pagoda, like Speke's, on the mantelpiece (we planned buying a proper censer) and the recital of a declaration written by me and forced upon the members.

The declaration said, after much about the common brotherhood in the struggle for human progress, that the lodge was to be a beginning in the training of a new order of enthusiastic leaders of mankind, poets, scientists, and philosophers. We accepted, it said, the Covenant of the Kibbo Kift, as our programme and would work for it in worship of the great spirit of evolution.

David had joined the lodge because his home was near and he was my friend, and because he spent every moment of his spare time telling me how wrong it was to have royalty and riches and that I had to become a socialist because you could never have a better system of society until you got rid of the boss class. He objected immediately that this about the great spirit was dragging in religion. So it was, of course, for I could not think of life except in religious terms. However, I argued that it wasn't, that the great spirit was only a name for whatever it was that made evolution go, and that he had to admit that something did make it go.

'Nae sech thing,' said David. 'Naething has to make it gae. It just gaes.'

Unexpectedly, Roly, full of a loftiness of purpose that day, attacked him.

'There may not be God,' said Roly, 'but you have to admit that there's something.'

'Whit something?' asked David in scorn.

'Life force, old chap. You read Bernard Shaw, don't you?'

'That's got nothing to dae wi' it.'

'Well, Bernard Shaw believes in a life force. There's nothing terrible about it.'

And this invocation of Bernard Shaw, in whom David believed more than anybody else, silenced him. Yet whenever I read the declaration he gave a disapproving grunt at the 'great spirit'.

'Great spirit, ma Aunt Fanny', he would declare. 'I make a personal reservation there, mon. I dinna worship anyone.'

Yet he did not for that reason leave us.



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The compulsion of socialism could not be resisted. The first phrase of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, 'Man is born free and he is everywhere in chains' broke upon me with such illumination that I could not go on reading but walked the streets in excitement for hours thinking how true this was and wondering why I had never perceived it before. It married, in my own mind, that other phrase in the Communist Manifesto David had given me summoning workers to unite, for they had nothing to lose but their chains. Yet Rousseau was the more moving for I could consider myself a man, but was doubtful whether I should be classed as a worker. And what the Kindred taught, after all, was that all *men* had become unfree, and all men, not merely workers had to be brought to a new way of life, for 'many a one believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they'.

Life was unfree because men exploited men, it was now possible to argue, because everyone grabbed for money and forgot all the rest. The consequences of this we felt in the terrible emptiness and purposelessness of life. What ought we to do with our lives? To what ought we to devote them? It was frightening to think that only we ourselves seemed aware that this was a problem at all, that older people appeared satisfied with the mean little suburban life in the dreary streets so familiar to us. Life ought to have the glory and excitement of a devotion, and it looked as though socialism even more than the Kindred might be the cause we had to espouse.

In a world so sparing of justice and so miserly of love as that we knew there was only one answer, and I began to attend Labour demonstrations with David. They were full of a revivalist—evangelist fervour, and sometimes resembled chapel meetings. The socialists of those days who regarded their creed simply as a practical, political application of Christianity would no doubt be astonished by its modern totalitarian variants. I treasure the memory of Fenner Brockway at one of the famous I.L.P. Queen's Hall election night rallies, wearing a scarlet blazer and conducting the lusty hymn of Ebenezer Elliott's which, my new-found atheism notwithstanding, I sang as heartily as everyone else:

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*When wilt thou save the people?*

*O God of mercy, when?*

*Not kings alone, but nations!*

*Not thrones and crowns, but men!*

*Flowers of Thy heart, O God, are they;*

*Let them not pass, like weeds, away—*

*Their heritage a sunless day*

*God save the people!*

*Shall crime bring crime for ever?*

*Strength aiding still the strong?*

*Is it Thy will, O Father,*

*That man shall toil for wrong?*

*'No,' say Thy mountains; 'No,' Thy skies,*

*Man's clouded sun shall brightly rise,*

*And songs ascend instead of sighs.*

*God save the people!*

The audience found nothing incongruous in this hymn. It echoed their mood and only began to disappear from Labour song-sheets when 'The Internationale', with its summons to throw away 'servile superstitions' superseded 'The Red Flag' as the battle song of the masses.

My friend Ellis praised Elliott's hymn. He said that it was a poem of merit which ought not to be allowed to die and so was flushed with pleasure to hear it sung. But then Ellis was a Fabian rather than a revolutionary. He maintained that one lost time that could never be replaced by the bloody disorder of revolution and that all other means to secure socialism should be exhausted before attempting it. He was out of work just then and subsisting rather frugally on a few lectures a week and his eyes were often full of fright and misery. Someone told me that he had attempted to commit suicide but lost his nerve, but this I found it hard to believe. He confided in me that if you sunbathed you needed less food and he would go out to Blenden Hall or to Danson Park (where one glorious misty dawn I had seen the nesting herons walking in the tops of trees) to sunbathe. When he came to tea with me he ate lots of bread and butter and inflexibly pursued each crumb on his plate with the wetted tip of his forefinger.



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Ellis was all that I wanted to be. He had graduated at Cambridge with honours. In the war he had been a pacifist and had edited one of the most outspoken educational journals ever founded—*The New Highway*. He had published a book on biology—of which he was to teach me much. He was at Ramsay MacDonald's side when the famous Battle of Woolwich Common took place and the munition workers of the Arsenal stoned the 'notorious pacifist' from the green on which he was attempting to speak. It was a famous event in Labour history. Ellis, recalling it, used to complain bitterly, 'The workers are their worst enemies. You could understand it if they had stoned an armament king!'

I proposed to Speke that we should ask Ellis to join our lodge, for he was passionately keen on woodcraft, and was the leader of the Co-operative section of the Kindred.

Speke looked scornful.

'He's defeated,' he said. 'We can't have any defeated people.'

He meant that if Ellis joined us it would be with too many reservations in his mind. He would not want to commit himself to all the things we believed in and hoped for, and I understood this perfectly. I was beginning to have reservations myself.

Incapable of longheadedness or diplomacy, if an idea obsessed me then sooner or later I burst out with it to someone else, careless of the effect it had upon them. To Mother and Father socialism was an illness of society as once to me atheism had been an infirmity of the mind, and my crude revolutionary zeal grieved and angered them. I received their protests with bitterness, as simply another expected injustice of capitalist society.

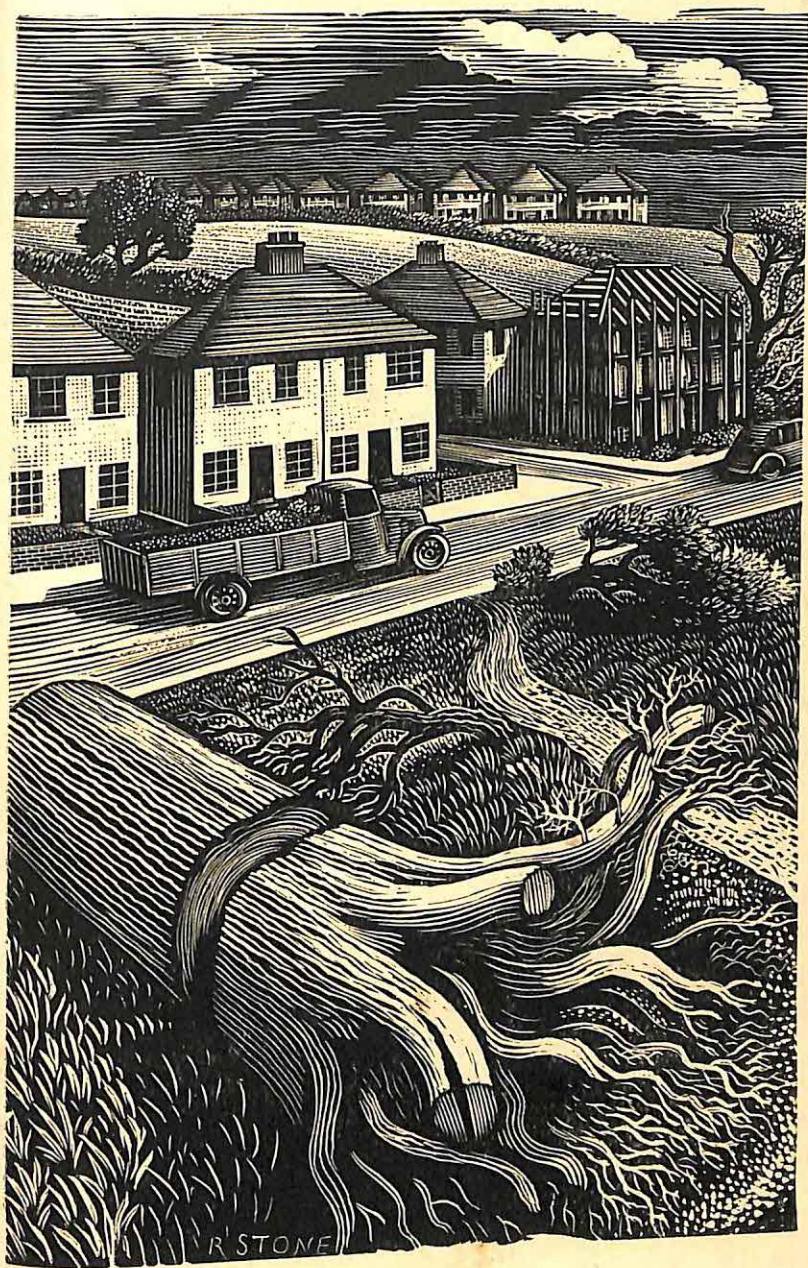
'I can't understand you, Leslie,' Mother would say, pale with misery and bewilderment. 'I can't understand a son of mine talking like that at all. And you who always wanted to be a missionary.'

She appealed to the family, the members of which stood in hostile, emotional attitudes about the homely kitchen.

'He always wanted to be a missionary, didn't he?'

Ah, but missionaries put blacks in clothes and gave them consumption, I had been told. They were the lackeys of the imperialists. And after them the traders came, dividing up the land, shooting down the natives. I could not be a missionary now. Besides,







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What were the everlasting things? Whence came I? My new creed cut me off from family and church and in solitariness I sought the answers and solitariness remained. It drove me out into the winter streets, hungry for the ideal, the complete companionship that is never found. One walked in the rain, with the mire underfoot, or in the company of the flinty stars, or under the galaxy of street lamps, lit windows and the naphtha flares of the markets beneath which the substantial world formed and melted and wavered, the pagodas of oranges and pineapples an eastern tribute piled on the floor of a cave the blue limits of which could not be discerned.

In the streets one saw the faces which shone in the light, disembodied faces, beautiful, evil, desired and in that moment gone. How contain them for ever, how hold the moment in the hand? They were gone, withdrawn into half-seen forms, claimed again by the dark. Turning off the strident main street where trams like lighted birdcages gay with bells swung noisily along, immediately among the quiet trees the astonishing arc of the sky soared from the herd of houses, impaling a million signalling stars on granite so remote and austere that the spine was braced with awareness of a loneliness beyond that of the human spirit.

Though the new houses were obliterating my world I could reach the woods and hills still. At night the scars of random building could not be seen. The fresh night air was all. Wearied by walking, I would rest on the turf among the trees. In the grass only the wind spoke, a dry, sibilant voice out of forgotten time. The earth pressed up and bore me. Here I was aware of its strength and shape. I was part of it and felt within it the reborn light and flame. It was strange, and I had somehow to comprehend it and reach it. Once I used to pray, but to whom could I pray now, in words? Yet this transport, this adoration, was prayer.

The trees reached up, veining the sky, netting the wind. The touch of trees moved me deeply. They trod down death, the dead leaves, the rotting wood, the carcasses of living things in the turf and beneath. The iron roots, greedy, rapacious with life, gripping the earth like talons, trod all down, even rival life. A kind of divinity dwelt in this determination to overcome death, to assert

the triumphant new life, never to be dissuaded. How could I have their silent strength?

I pressed myself to the turf, smelling its moist, reassuring greenness. The silence went from me at that point to the furthest stars millions of light-years away. There was something I did not fully comprehend, which might indeed be for ever beyond my grasp. Yet I strove to attain it. At that moment, in that intensity of thought it seemed quite near. If I could hold on, striving for it, poised there above me in the trees and stars, cupping me round in the earth it might at any moment spill over in a thunder-clap of revelation. For this I waited, all grief and terror extinguished.

Lord Devonport, who had founded the International Stores was once Food Controller lived at Great Marlowe. Lady Devonport would frequently send a hurried grocery order for half a pound of China tea and a plum cake to Mitre Square and ask for immediate delivery. One Saturday she rang up for her China tea and, the only office boy willing to volunteer, I was bundled off with a small parcel and a few shillings to Great Marlowe where a Rolls Royce picked me up and bore me and my cargo to a very large house. It was the first time I had ridden in a private vehicle. Nevertheless after tea and plum cake at the house I refused to drive back in it. I had seen from the whirling country lanes a vista of the Thames in springtime, with mile upon mile of rolling beechwood, and insisted upon walking. This was my Saturday afternoon and I wanted to enjoy it and make it last for as long as possible. I should have fought anybody who tried to put me back in the car again.

All along the lane on the down side spring lay warm and fragrant. The valley odours and the sharp smell of water came up from the river. The beechwood was transparently green and silver limbs curved downwards into green misted caves on fire with the gold of last year's leaves. After day upon day in the noisy fringes of the East End it was intoxicating, and I sat upon a bank to let the sun soak into me, throwing my bowler on to the grass behind me and forgetting my train. Across the river cumuli massed, piling dazzling snows upon purple in the sunshine. The world slipped gradually away and I felt only the burning sun and the serenity,



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and looked down upon the green torrent of the beeches flowing to the river, and longed to glissade down them into the water. Not a house could be seen, or a man, and the silence was intense. I was full of gratitude for my absolute loneliness.

The sun clouded while I was resting there and I heard unexpectedly the roar of a waterfall, and looking up saw the rain rushing down the vale in one opaque wall of silver and silk, blotting out the beechwoods. A herd of cows lifted startled heads in the field below, and some racial memory stirring turned suddenly and raced from the lances of the rain across ancestral prairies. I picked up my bowler to run and found shelter only under some pines growing above a lichened wall by the roadside and squeezed myself anxiously under them as the cloudburst reached me.

To shelter was futile. The rain deluged me, a warm shower-bath. The gutter of my bowler filled up and a waterfall looped and cascaded from its rim. My shabby clothes soaked it up and my cheap and wretched collar became pulp. 'Why hide from the rain?' I asked myself. It has been drenching living things from time immemorial and there was no reason to be afraid of it. I doffed my useless bowler and lifted my face. The torrents drenched my hair and ran in streams down my neck. The taste of the rain was pure, like holy water on the lips, and its smell exhilarated me.

The storm went as quickly as it came and the sun shining fiercely through the purified air upon the steaming woods caused the whole golden scented atmosphere suddenly to boil. Through my wet clothes the sun burnt me. After the roar of the water, a deep silence, then as though at an unseen conductor's beat simultaneously across the valley every hushed unseen bird broke into song. The cleared sky was as blue as a kingfisher's wing. A gust of rapture swept powerfully through me and for what then occurred within there are no words. When you are gazing at the flat mirrored surface of a river, perfect in its own dimension, unflawed by depth, a moment will come if you continue to watch when you are suddenly aware that the perfect surface has gone and cannot be restored and that what indeed you see are the depths of the river, with its complex, shifting golden lights and its misted brown landscape and sinuous shadows gliding silently and alive

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there. It is a moment that cannot be willed, that comes slowly as the eyes focus and always with the same shock of recognition.

In the same way, and with the same shock, I stared through the celestial landscape. It was not itself, it was merely the intimation of a majesty beyond it. It was the translucent surface through which an unbearable glory shone. I was unable to move, so profound was the sensation of the unreality of the seen world and the reality of what lay just beyond it.

A few months before I should have thought of God, for the intimation of a presence was almost irresistible, but I no longer believed in Him and it was therefore impossible that I should have visions of Him. But if I could not think in terms of a personal God there was nothing to deny pantheism to me. It was quite possible to believe in Speke's universe and to think of it as divine (I argued with myself). Indeed a quotation attributed to Pythâgoras, 'As if Divinity dwelt not in the very atoms', had been haunting me for days. It seemed to resolve at once that love of God which I was able to discard only with the greatest difficulty, with love of nature, my consoler, and with all the theories of evolution and materialism my head was aching with the effort to absorb and justify.

Not easily to forget, I tore down branches of pine from the trees around me and carried them back through trains and tubes and trams, to deck the walls of the spare bedroom which I had taken over as a study. The smell of the pine woods would always be about the house.





# The Annihilation of

Man

by

LESLIE PAUL

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